

THE Christian CENTURY

Thinking Critically. Living Faithfully.



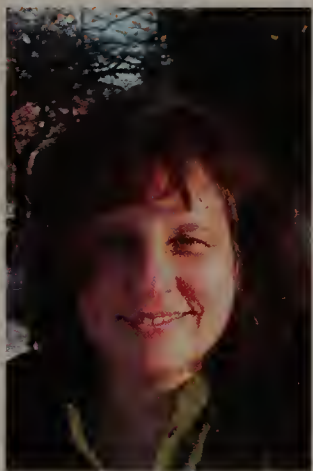
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Read **Carol Zaleski** @
Faith Matters



“‘Energy,’ William Blake said, ‘is eternal delight.’ But Blake was wrong; energy is a youthful, and therefore transient and corruptible, delight. Eternal delight reveals itself not when we possess energy in natural abundance, but when our energy is depleted and then mysteriously renewed by a source outside ourselves.”

(from “Renewable energy” Faith Matters)



THE
Christian
CENTURY

Editor's DESK

by John M. Buchanan

Serious waiting

*Oh! You better watch out, you better not cry,
you better not pout, I'm tellin' you why:
Santa Claus is coming to town.*

THERE'S SOMETHING almost painful yet delicious about a child who's waiting for Christmas, counting the days, wishing and hoping, until on December 24 he can't fall asleep.

It's a variation on the waiting we do all our lives. We wait to be old enough to go to school, ride a bicycle, and drive an automobile. We wait to land a job or find the right person. We wait for a promotion, a raise, or retirement. And some of us wait decades for the Chicago Cubs to play in and win a World Series.

Waiting is a universal and deeply human experience. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, two characters sit and wait for Godot. They talk and talk, back and forth, but Godot never comes.

Although it may be futile to wait for Godot, waiting for God is a major biblical theme. "I wait for the Lord all day long," the psalmist wrote. Hosea urges, "Wait continually for your God," and Isaiah says, "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, walk and not faint."

Biblical waiting takes place during the Babylonian exile, a time that's bleak and not at all promising. The people of God are being held in captivity far from home with only precious memories of their beautiful city and temple. We sing about them during Advent: "O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here." Over and over down through the centuries the prophets advise them to wait and watch for God to act, for the promised day of the Lord.

For many of us Advent is the most meaningful season of the church year. We slow down and sit for a while in darkness while the liturgy turns to somber purple, and we sing profound and beautiful hymns in minor keys. It's time for serious waiting for the Christ child, for the future the child promises is not only coming but also present in the life of the world if we can watch and wait patiently for it. It is not passive waiting, sitting around whiling away the time. Advent waiting is living into that future, leaning into it by praying, hoping, and working for the coming reign of God. It is anything but the mindless and meaningless waiting of Beckett's *Godot*.

In these weeks, let us wait and watch for ways the promised kingdom already comes, ways that are quiet and unexpected—the kindness of a friend, the healing of a gentle touch, an act of generosity, a gesture of grace.

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IN THIS Issue

6

Letters

Advance care planning

7

Refugee crisis

The Editors: Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey host millions

8

CenturyMarks

Ecclesial credit, proof text, etc.

10

The other woman

Debbie Blue: A closer look at Hagar

12

Hyphenated life

Joyce Shin: Mixed loyalties in family and faith

22

To give & to receive

Christmas recommendations from CENTURY editors and columnists

32

Refuge in Uganda

David A. Hoekema: A poor nation opens its doors

36

Right-brained apologetics

David Heim: Writer Francis Spufford

On the cover: *Creadora de Luz* (*Creator of Light*),
mixed media on canvas, by Lalo Garcia (lalogarcia.com)

NEWS

- 14** Insurgents displace Nigerian Christians;
Federal court of appeals reverses judge's decision on clergy
housing taxes;
Egypt's Christians, attacked for supporting coup leader,
await rebuilding

IN REVIEW

- 42 Books**
Amy Frykholm: *Lila*, by Marilynne Robinson
Greg Carey: *Jesus against the Scribal Elite*, by Chris Keith
Dennis O'Brien: *Aquinas on the Beginning and End of
Human Life*, by Fabrizio Amerini
Robert Westbrook: *Days of Fire*, by Peter Baker
Phil Waite: *Healthy Churches, Faithful Pastors*, by David Keck
- 52 Media**
Jason Byassee: Cosmic questions
- 55 Art**
Mikeal C. Parsons and Heidi J. Hornik: *Adoration of the
Magi*, by Gentile da Fabriano

COLUMNS

- 3 Editor's Desk**
John M. Buchanan: Serious waiting
- 19–21 Living by the Word**
Wes Avram, Thomas G. Long
- 41 Faith Matters**
Carol Zaleski: Pickles: A history
- 53 Church in the Making**
Carol Howard Merritt: Music that changes

POETRY

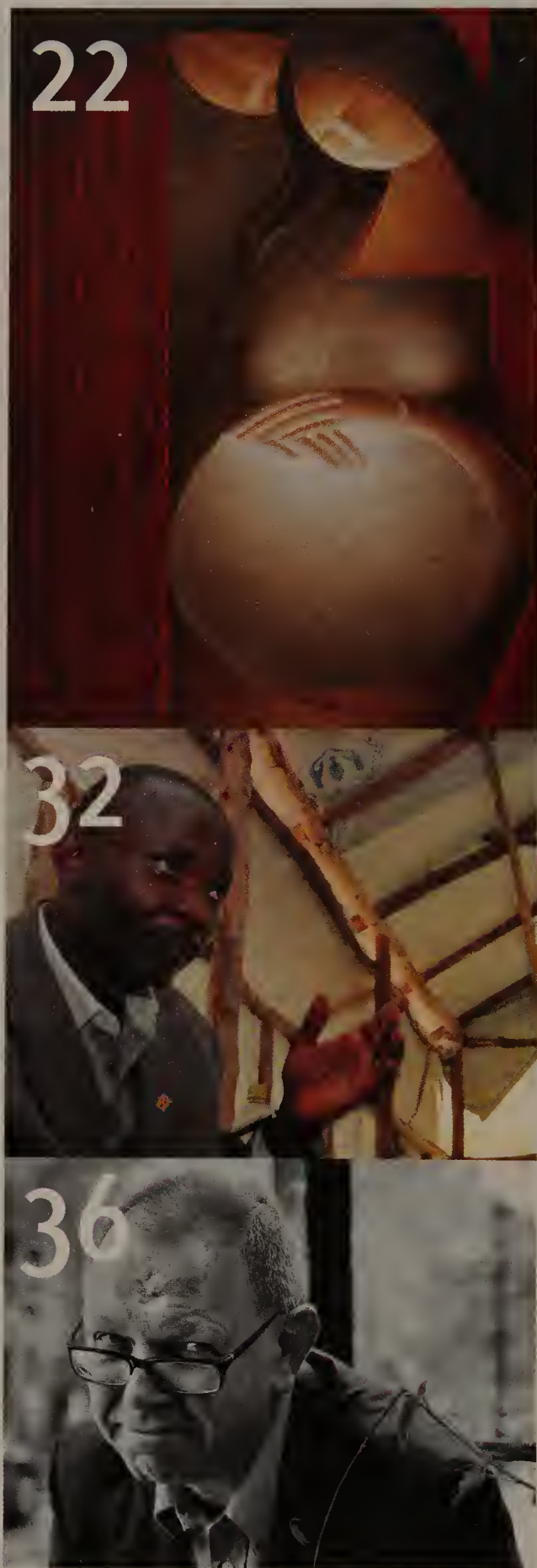
- 11 Muriel Nelson:** Bucolic
- 13 Brian Doyle:** Culpa

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LETTERS

Advance care planning

Your thoughtful coverage of Respecting Choices, Gundersen Health System's advance care planning program, touches on a matter very close to us ("Dying wishes," by Jennifer L. Hollis, Nov. 12).

Honoring Choices Wisconsin is working to make advance care planning the standard of patient care in 21 health systems across Wisconsin, thus furthering the LaCrosse model. We also have a group of 17 faith ambassadors giving presentations on advance care planning to faith-based communities in the Madison area (some ambassadors are also trained as advance care planning facilitators). We've found that faith-based communities consistently achieve better results in terms of attendance, quality of dialogue, and the attendees' willingness to take the next step.

Thank you for spotlighting end-of-life issues. If just one person initiates a conversation from reading your article, we count that as a great success.

*John Maycroft, Joyce Hart Smerick,
Erin Agesen*

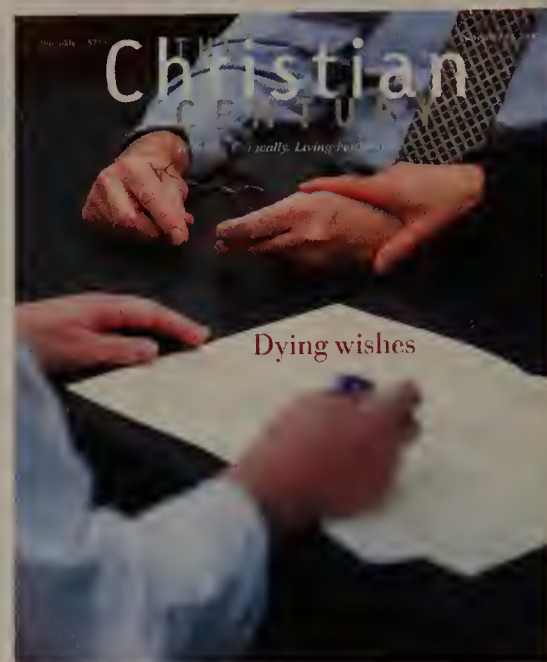
*Honoring Choices Wisconsin
Madison, Wis.*

As a hospice volunteer I was pleased to read "Dying wishes" and the interview with Daniel Sulmasy, "Can doctors help us die well?" I am a great admirer of hospice teams of doctors, nurses, certified nursing assistants, social workers, and chaplains. We hospice volunteers are often praised, but we receive more than we give. I sometimes volunteer to sit with those who are actively dying and have no families to be with them. When someone dies on my watch, I count it a privilege to have been a presence and to have held that person's hand.

*Richard D. Daetwiler
Aurora, Colo.*

A moderate approach to the end of life is at some point to stop trying to hold back death. God's plan is that people die, and to fight against that is what some would call playing God.

Ending the fight to prolong life is not



something where we can expect medical professionals to give advice and leadership. Individual people need to make their decisions about when they want to accept the path to death.

*Peggy Fredrickson
Sudbury, Mass.*

Faithful marriage . . .

I applaud Gerald Schlabach's thoughts concerning the significance of marriage ("What is marriage now?" Oct. 29) and would carry them one step further. Augustine's "big three"—*sacramentum*, *fidei*, and *proles*—really reduce to *fidelitas*, "faithfulness." I have never conducted or attended a wedding in which the couple was given permission to sleep together. Instead, the essence of the service has been the promise of fidelity, made in the sight of God (*sacramentum*, *fides*) to restrict sexual congress. Same-sex marriage restricts homosexual activity.

No doubt about it, sexual attraction is real. But it would not take many conversations with couples at their golden anniversary to show that Augustine may have been right in not listing it among the chief "goods of marriage."

*George F. Dole
Bath, Me.*

December 10, 2014

Refugee crisis

In November a third American was beheaded by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, which has taken control of parts of those two countries. Peter Kassig was captured in Syria, where he was working as a volunteer medical assistant, trying to address what a top United Nations official has called “the biggest humanitarian emergency of our era.”

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as many as 13.6 million people have been displaced by the conflict in Iraq and by civil war in Syria. Over 3 million Syrian refugees are now encamped in the neighboring countries of Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Nearly 2 million Iraqis have been displaced this year.

The refugees put a huge burden on their host countries. Lebanon, a country of 4 million, has over 1 million registered refugees. With winter approaching, these refugees face bleak prospects. Their plight is exacerbated, the UNHCR claims, by an underfunded relief effort, which faces a shortfall of \$58 million. The charity Oxfam charges the United States with negligence in supporting refugee efforts, claiming that it has contributed only 60 percent of its fair share.

The United States and European countries have also been reluctant to accept refugees from Syria and Iraq. The surge in anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe has made those who move there feel unwelcome. Some refugees have decided to take their chances and move back to Syria. “I realized that I was only regarded and treated as a human being where I come from,” said a Syrian Christian who moved his family back to Syria from the Netherlands.

What can American Christians do? We can encourage our government to increase direct aid to the refugees and to support the refugee work of the host countries. We can push our government to open its doors to more displaced peoples from Iraq and Syria. We can support nongovernmental agencies that are working to meet human needs.

As for addressing the deep issues that are shaping the conflicts, the United States is severely limited. Military intervention by Western nations would likely have only a marginal impact, and Americans are rightly suspicious of undertaking the kind of financial and military investment that was made in Iraq.

Joshua Landis, a Syria expert at the University of Oklahoma, observes that a great and bloody “sorting out” process is taking place among ethnic and religious groups in the region, especially among Sunni and Shi’a Muslims. He compares it to a process that took place in Eastern Europe in the mid-20th century. Landis foresees the eventual emergence of new nations that are more religiously and ethnically homogenous. In this situation, the United States must work with other nations to try to contain the conflict and to address the needs of displaced peoples.

With winter approaching, the 1 million refugees in Lebanon face bleak prospects.

CENTURY marks

ECCLESIAL CREDIT: Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby is helping to reform the payday lending enterprise in the United Kingdom by advocating new caps on interest. At the same time, Welby is urging the church to support credit unions that charge reasonable interest rates and don't threaten delinquent borrowers with menacing letters from bogus lawyers. Welby has a business background, and his mother was an assistant to Winston Churchill (*Spectator*, November 15).

GROWING EDGE: Nearly one in five Latin Americans are now Protestant, and a majority of those Protestants are Pentecostals. In less than a century Pentecostalism has done more to become an indigenous religion in Latin America than Roman Catholicism did over a four-century period, says Andrew

Chesnut from Virginia Commonwealth University. Pentecostal worship music has the same Latin rhythms, the pastors live lives more like the people in their congregations, and the ministry of healing appeals to many with physical maladies and addictions. A prosperity gospel appeals to poor people, but other Latin American Pentecostals are from the middle class (Pew Research Center, November 14).

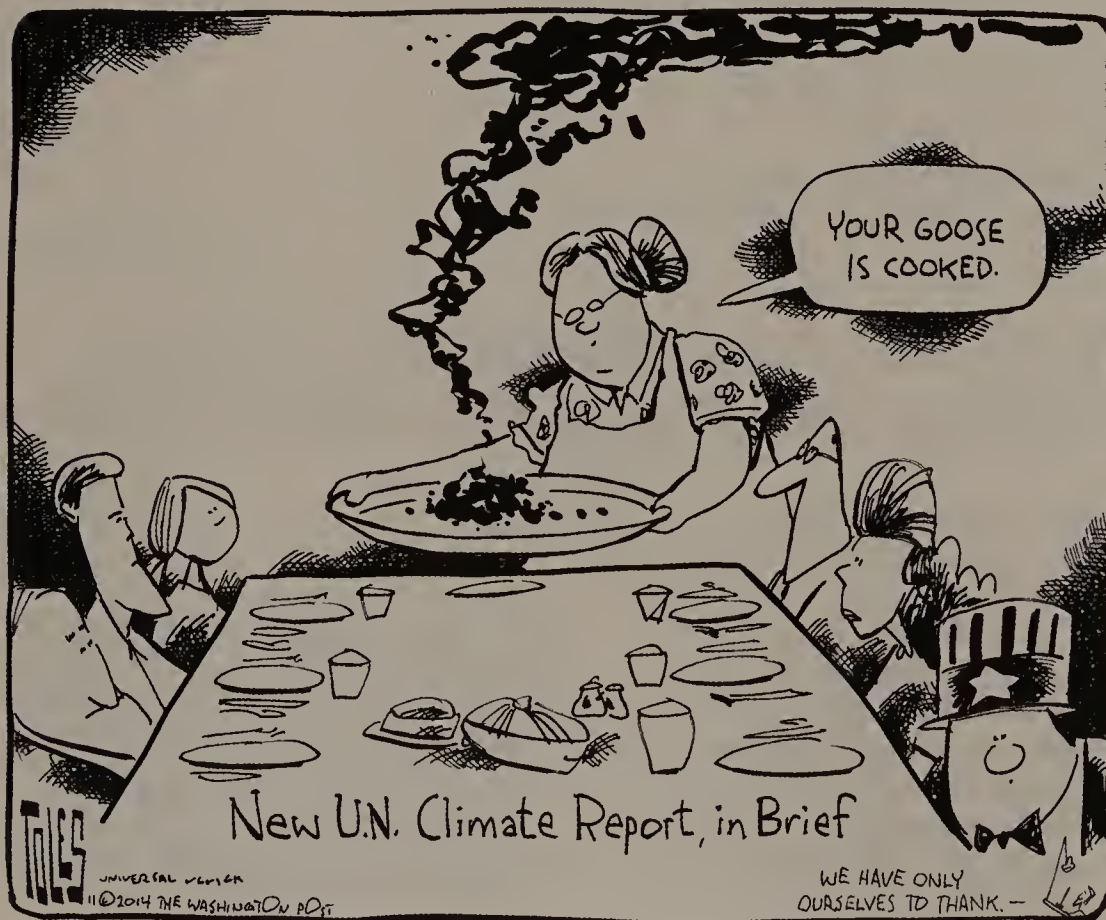
TONED DOWN: Evangelical leaders are softening their tone in opposition to same-sex marriage. They recognize that the public is accepting same-sex marriage, so they've shifted their focus to protecting religious rights. A generational shift may also be contributing: according to a 2014 Public Religion Research Institute poll, 70 percent of all evangelicals oppose gay marriage, but

43 percent of white evangelical millennials support it (CNN, November 16).

HOT SEAT: No one can question Reuven (Ruvy) Rivlin's commitment to Zionism. He opposes a two-state solution to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians; and he sees nothing wrong with continued Jewish settlement of the West Bank, since he thinks the land belongs to Israel anyway. Now that he's become president of Israel, a largely ceremonial post chosen by the Knesset, he is outspoken in his criticism of racism and jingoism in Israeli politics and in support of Palestinian rights. He even visited an Arab village to apologize for a massacre of 48 Palestinians in 1956 and made an antibullying video with a Palestinian boy who had been bullied. Rivlin himself has been vilified and called a "lying little Jew." Photoshopped pictures of him wearing a red kaffiyeh, the Palestinian head scarf, are circulating on the Internet (*New Yorker*, November 17).

BACKING OBAMA: The American Catholic bishops support President Obama's intention to take executive action on immigration. "It would be derelict not to support the administrative actions . . . which would provide immigrants and their families legal protection," said Eusebio Elizondo, chairman of the U.S. Catholic Committee on Migration. In the past the bishops have been critical of the president on gay marriage and the contraception mandate of the Affordable Care Act. Now they are under pressure to follow Pope Francis's lead in making social justice issues a priority (RNS).

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE: The Military Advisory Board, representing all branches of the military, has issued a



study about the national security implications of global warming. The report says that “climate change impacts are already accelerating instability in vulnerable areas of the world and are serving as catalysts for conflict.” The board calls for “coordinated and well-executed actions to limit heat-trapping gases and increase resilience to help prevent and protect against the worst projected climate change impacts” (*Forbes*, November 14).

GROOMING EXEMPTIONS: The American Civil Liberties Union and the United Sikhs are suing the U.S. Army for rejecting efforts by a Sikh student at Hofstra University to enlist. Iknoor Singh’s religion requires that he have a beard and wear a turban, both forbidden in military grooming and dress codes. The Department of Defense sometimes grants religious exemptions, but not for Singh’s beard and headdress. Over 105 members of Congress sent a letter to Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in March urging the Defense Department to give Sikhs opportunities to serve (*Time*, November 12).

FEW VACANCIES: The American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature have issued a jobs report for the 2013–14 academic year. Only 452 positions were listed with them, down from 548 the year before. In 2007–08, just before the economic downturn, there were 652 listings (*Inside Higher Ed*, November 12).

PROOF TEXT: Amazon says that the most highlighted Bible passage on Amazon’s Kindle e-reader is Philippians 4:6–7: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (*Atlantic*, November 2).

LATEST HOAX? In the new book *The Lost Gospel*, Canadian filmmaker Simcha Jacobovici and York University professor Barrie Wilson claim that Jesus was secretly married to Mary

“To me, the big mission we have is to convince the people in the pews that science is good. If I’m a missionary of anything I’m a missionary of science to the religious.”

— **Guy Consolmagno**, a Jesuit and Vatican scientist from Michigan, who was recently awarded the prestigious Carl Sagan Medal “for outstanding communication by an active planetary scientist to the general public” (*Here and Now*, November 11)

“Modern American political discourse is dominated by cheap cynicism about public policy, a free-floating contempt for any and all efforts to improve our lives. And this cheap cynicism is completely unjustified.”

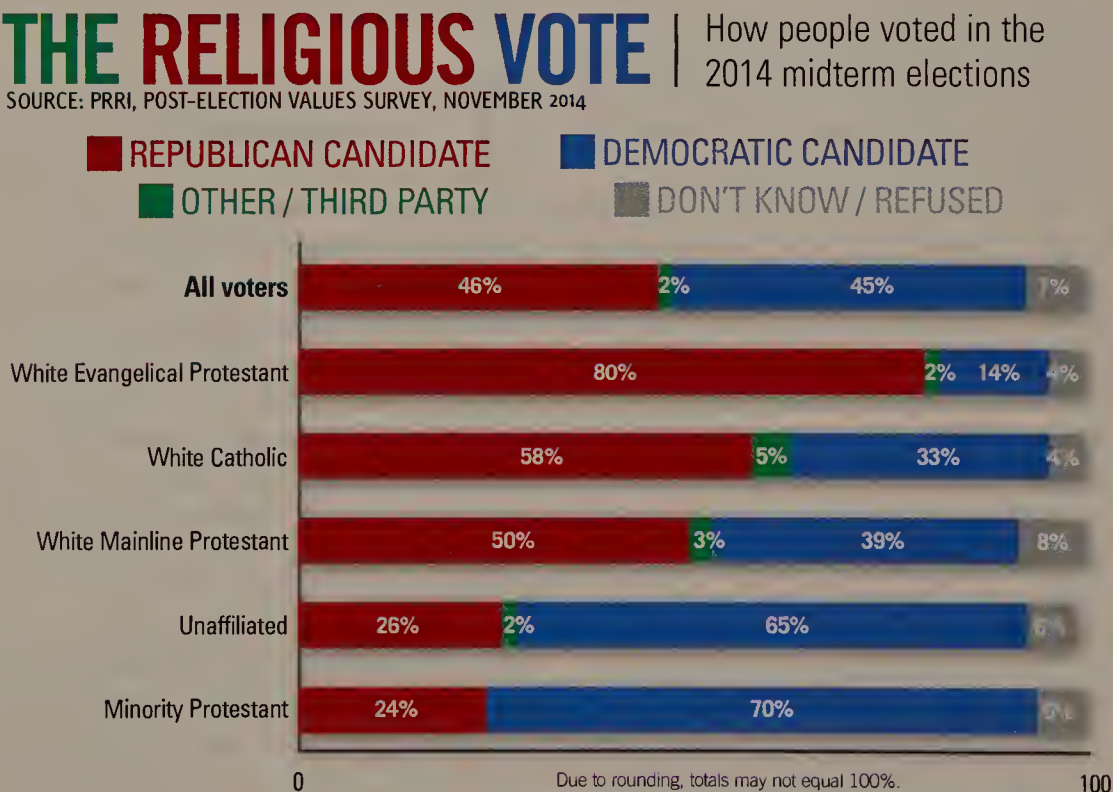
— Princeton economist **Paul Krugman** arguing that the federal government is making favorable economic progress not acknowledged by its critics (*New York Times*, November 16)

“I think a resumption of the Cold War would be a historic tragedy. If a conflict is avoidable, on a basis reflecting morality and security, one should try to avoid it.”

— Former secretary of state **Henry Kissinger**, who claims that Russian president Putin’s aggressive actions in Ukraine are partly in response to Western provocations (*Der Spiegel*, November 13)

Magdalene and had sexual relations as well as a family. The book is purportedly based on the decoding of a 1,450-year-old manuscript that’s been in the British Library since 1847. Nineteenth-century scholars had decided the document was

insignificant. The text features a figure named Joseph who has characteristics similar to Jesus. “It sounds like the deepest bilge,” says Oxford historian Diarmaid MacCulloch (*Washington Post*, November 10).



The other woman

by Debbie Blue

THE BIBLE IS not good propaganda. This is one of the things I like best about it.

Its heroes often lie, steal, and drink too much. Institutions are established and then undermined by counternarratives that expose their corruption. Seeds for the undoing of the official narratives are always being planted. Stories are told and then revised; the people of God are condemned and redeemed. The Bible is not a slick promotional tool for a nation or an institution or even a particular set of beliefs as much as it is a witness to a God who is profoundly alive—and always a little outside the sphere of what we know. This is a beautiful thing about monotheism: it eschews idolatry in favor of a lover who resists calculation, a lover who knows no bounds.

Of course, this hasn't kept us from using the Bible to enforce boundaries, support prejudice, fuel hatred, and promote one nation over another. The story of Hagar and Ishmael has often been read as if it explains some inevitable animosity among the Abrahamic faiths. We should try reading it differently.

A September survey by the Pew Research Center finds that an increasing share of the public—including seven out of ten white evangelicals—believes that Islam is more likely than other religions to encourage violence among its believers. This may be partly a result of what makes the news. We can't escape ISIS coverage, but I had to work to find news about the hajj, the October event in which more than 2 million diverse Muslims made their peaceful pilgrimage to Mecca—and Islamic leaders spoke against extremism and in favor of nonviolence.

But it may also have something to do with how we tell our stories. While Hagar

has been an important figure in the African-American church, she doesn't usually get loads of positive attention in Christianity. The way I heard it in Sunday school, Abraham's relationship with Hagar is a mistake. She is sultry and sinister—the archetypal other woman. Isaac, Abe's son with his wife Sarah, is sweet and compliant. But Hagar's son Ishmael is gruff and wary, a bully with something suspect up his sleeve. I can't say exactly how this was conveyed back then, but I've seen recent curriculum that is quite pointed: Ishmael mocks his half

along the lines of “with less esteem.” This could be because Sarah has forced her to have sex with Sarah's 85-year-old husband. Or maybe it's because Sarah is asking her to bear a child she will have to give away. In any case, Sarah tells Abraham she doesn't like the way Hagar looked at her. This might indicate that Hagar has done something significant enough to irritate Sarah, but it's hardly evidence that she is arrogant or cruel.

After Hagar flees Sarah's harsh treatment, an angel finds her in the desert and tells her to go back to camp, because

The God of Abraham and Hagar seeks relationship with the outcast.

brother, thus deserving to be banished by God to the desert. This reading depends on one word, *m'tzahek*, which can be translated many ways.

The text is really anything but clear on the moral qualities of the characters involved. This doesn't seem to be the point. What is clear is that the Bible gives Hagar a remarkable story. She takes over for two different major passages in Genesis—fairly long, detailed narratives that disrupt the larger patriarchal plot lines. Sarah can't get pregnant. She's well past the age for bearing children. She knows there needs to be an heir, so she tells Abraham to have sex with her Egyptian maid, Hagar. Hagar gets pregnant.

Sarah should be happy, but she isn't. Some translations say that once Hagar gets pregnant, she looks at Sarah with “contempt.” But the Hebrew is actually much softer than that, something more

“Behold, you shall bear a son and you shall call him Ishmael.” This is not the only time we hear such a line in the Bible, but it is the first—the first annunciation. The angel gives Hagar the same promise God gave Abraham: “I will greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for the multitude.”

Then Hagar, this *woman*, gives God a name. She's the first person in the Bible to call God by name. She calls God “The God Who Sees”—a beautiful name and a significant moment for monotheism. Unlike other deities that are distant and unapproachable, the God of Abraham and Hagar draws near, pays attention, seeks relationship with the outcast.

The angel says Ishmael will be “a wild ass of a man.” This may sound insulting, but in the Bible the wild ass is, perhaps most significantly, *free* (see Job 39:5). Hagar's name means *other* or *stranger*. She's an outlier, an Egyptian, and though Sarah deals with her harshly, God is ten-

der with her. God watches over her, intervenes for her protection.

Hagar returns to camp. But later, when Sarah's son is born, Sarah casts her out again—determined that “the slave woman's son” will not share in Isaac's inheritance. This turns into a heart-wrenching scene. Abraham doesn't want to send them away. He puts Ishmael on Hagar's back and gives her a little water and bread. When the water is gone, Hagar puts her dying boy under a bush and sits down. She pleads, “Don't make me watch my son die.” She is the first person in the Bible to weep.

God responds quickly. God tells Hagar not to be afraid, to “lift up the lad and hold him fast with your hand for I will make of him a great nation.”

Hagar's story parallels Abraham's to a stunning degree. She takes the first son into the wilderness, where his death seems imminent until an angel speaks and shows her a well. Abe takes the second son up to Mount Moriah, where his death seems imminent until an angel speaks and shows him a ram. The two stories include parallel language, sometimes using the exact same words. Abe is the central character in the Isaac story. Hagar is the central character in the Ishmael story. It's almost like a matriarch on par with the patriarch!

No matter how the dominant narrative is inclined, the Hagar story is planted in the middle of it—just the sort of unsettling seed our nonpropagandistic scripture is forever planting. You'd think it might blossom into something creative, sustaining, and redeeming, but it doesn't exactly play out that way. From Isaac come the Jewish people, from Ishmael comes Islam—so the story goes, and Hagar's narrative is read as if it prophesies tanks and bombs and perpetual strife. There are other possibilities.

There aren't many more stories about Hagar in the Hebrew scripture, and most Christians don't think to regard her. But there are vital stories about her in the Islamic tradition. In Islam, Hagar is the matriarch of monotheism. It is through Ishmael that Muhammad comes. God leads Hagar into the wilderness so that through her a new faith might be born.

Debbie Blue is a pastor at House of Mercy, a church in St. Paul, Minnesota.

These Islamic stories are similar to the ones in the Hebrew scripture. Hagar and Ishmael are sent to the wilderness, where they run out of water. In a total panic Hagar starts running back and forth between two hills, desperately looking for water. After his mom's seventh run, Ishmael kicks the ground with his heel and causes a miraculous well to spring out of the ground. It's called the Zamzam well, and Muslims visit it when they make their pilgrimage to Mecca. It's part of their pilgrimage to reenact Hagar's grief by running seven times between the hills. Then they drink from the Zamzam, and they take some of the water back home in memory of Hagar.

The Kaaba, at Mecca, is the holiest shrine in Islam. According to tradition, it was built by Adam and then rebuilt later by Abraham and Ishmael, when Abraham came to visit his son. While in the Hebrew scripture Abraham seems to abandon Ishmael, in the Islamic stories he keeps coming to visit. There's something heartbreaking and beautiful about these stories. One son in one place, one in the other—Abe trudging back and forth, the father of not one faith but two. Abraham loves both of his sons.

The tension created by these different narratives hasn't always turned out to be creative. But couldn't it be? Trying to simplify the story is not just less interesting; it's also dangerous. We need to listen for

the repressed narrative—not because it's clever to read this way, but because the life of the world depends on it. If scripture hardens our hearts against anyone, I'm pretty sure we're reading it wrong.

Here's an odd biblical detail I like, a beautiful undermining of the grand narrative. When Joseph—an important figure in the official Hebrew story—is abandoned in the wilderness by his family, he is saved by a passing caravan of Ishmaelites. This detail doesn't really fit at the level of historical narrative. There's no way the descendants of Ishmael could appear so soon as an established group; Ishmael himself is just two generations past, the half-brother of Joseph's grandfather. It seems instead like a lovely little plant in the story: a caravan of Ishmaelites saves a Hebrew patriarch.

And then there's this. Near the end of Abraham's life, after Sarah has died, he marries Keturah. According to Midrashic tradition, “Keturah” is actually Hagar's real name—“Hagar,” the “other,” is just a description. So Abraham doesn't cut off the counternarrative. He embraces it, takes it into his heart. He lies in bed with it—makes love with Hagar again, and they have many more children.

In this reading, the world is not hopelessly divided. It isn't one side or the other. Hagar and Abraham embrace in their old age. Boundaries are blurred, and God's love is let loose. May this somehow be so.

CC

Bucolic

So tonight we carol again squinting
at words by candlelight: *betwixt*
an ox and a silly poor ass,
and (louder) *mortal flesh keep silence.*

Animal warmth in this darkness rises
among us with each singer's breath, as shadows
suggest great slumbering beasts
whose fur brushes us with peace and eases

our way to believe *Incarnatus est.*
Bodies and beast-shadows sway and grow still.
No one startles as candle
flames tongue air that now seems alive. Breathing. Blessed.

Muriel Nelson

Hyphenated life

by Joyce Shin

EACH SUMMER when I was a girl, my family would drive from Kentucky to Minnesota for our annual visit with relatives. We made the trip in two days, stopping for lunch and breaks at rest areas and the occasional fast-food restaurant.

On the day of departure, I wanted to roll out of bed and right into the station wagon. Instead I was instructed to brush my teeth, wash my face, dress myself in the tidy clothes picked out the night before, and comb and part my hair so that it could be pulled neatly back into my matching barrettes. I remember asking my mom why we couldn't just wear our comfortable pajama shorts and why we had to fix our hair when we were going to be in the car for two days. She explained that many of the people in the towns along the way had most likely never seen an Asian person before. Therefore, we would want to make a good impression.

For better or worse, from an early age I have been very conscious—and self-conscious—of the thresholds that I cross, thresholds that signal to me differences. Growing up as a minority, not every arena was the same to me. Whether it was a rest area or restaurant along the highway, a school, a church, or a home, I was aware that each arena had its own norms. If I wanted not only to survive but also to flourish, I had to be aware of every threshold that I crossed.

A few years ago, in the company of hundreds of Muslims from the Chicago area, I was struck again by an awareness of thresholds. Clergy from different religious communities had been invited by the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago to attend the Muslim community's annual festive celebration

of Eid, marking the end of Ramadan. Eid follows the lunar calendar, and that year it happened to fall on an anniversary eve of 9/11. Muslim communities across the United States were nervous that non-Muslim Americans would not know about this coincidence and would therefore misinterpret the celebrations of Eid as dishonoring the solemn anniversary.

In an effort to prevent such a misunderstanding, the council invited clergy from different religious communities to a

whole generation of Muslim Americans would grow up feeling the great weight of self-consciousness.

In *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum describes the development of a minority identity. She reflects on an exercise she uses in teaching in which she asks students to complete the sentence "I am _____" using as many descriptors as they can think of in 60 seconds.

My family's identity includes multiple loyalties and requires many hyphens.

press conference at which we could show our solidarity with our Muslim friends. We were also invited to view the program that preceded their prayers. The gathering took place at Toyota Park soccer stadium outside Chicago. Hundreds of Muslim families from the area were seated with their prayer mats, filling the lawn of the stadium.

Before prayers began, several prominent political and civic leaders spoke, expressing their support for the Muslim community. The imam from the Mosque Foundation then spoke about the duty Muslims have to live exceptionally upstanding and moral lives, reflecting the best values of the Islamic faith, so that their neighbors, colleagues, and fellow citizens would come to appreciate rather than fear and even hate Islam. As I heard these words reverberating loudly over the stadium speakers, and noticed so many children in attendance with their parents, it struck me that a

"All kinds of trait descriptions are used—friendly, shy, assertive, intelligent, honest, and so on—but over the years I have noticed something else," wrote Tatum. "Students of color usually mention their racial or ethnic group: for instance, I am Black, Puerto Rican, Korean American." She goes on to say, "White students who have grown up in strong ethnic enclaves occasionally mention being Irish or Italian. But in general White students rarely mention being White."

Tatum noticed a similar pattern regarding gender, religion, and sexuality. "Women usually mention being female, while men don't usually mention their maleness. Jewish students often say they are Jews, while mainline Protestants rarely mention their religious identification." You can see the pattern: "Where a person is a member of the dominant or advantaged social group, the category is usually not mentioned. That element of their identity is taken for granted by

them because it is taken for granted by the dominant culture.” The elements of a mainline Protestant’s identity that capture their attention are those that other people notice.

Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians in the United States are a long way from the experience of Christians of the early church who, having endured religious persecution on all sides, must have been self-consciously Christian. Unlike those early generations of Christians, whose words, deeds, and decisions were all suspiciously watched, Christians in this country do not feel so self-conscious.

But a strange phenomenon is happening. I began noticing it when my daughter began nursery school seven years ago. Teachers invited parents to share with the class a holiday celebrated by their families at home. The first mom to visit the class taught the children about Eid. It was a lovely celebration, and the children got a delicious taste of this religious holiday.

A month later, when my daughter wanted to invite her new friend Olivia for a play date on a Sunday after church, she asked me if I thought Olivia also went to church. I suspected that Olivia and her family went to a Lutheran church in our neighborhood, but since I didn’t know for sure, I said, “Why don’t you ask Olivia what religion she is?” Right away my four-year-old dismissed the idea, saying, “Ever since we learned about Eid, everyone says they are Muslim.”

My husband and I came to see our daughter’s nursery school classroom as a microcosm, and during that year we often remarked to ourselves on how much the world has changed since we were kids. Back then, the lines that marked differences in religion, race, and culture were found between social groups; they were social thresholds that we had to cross.

Joyce Shin is associate pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. This article is adapted from a speech she gave in September at the annual dinner of the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago and the Presbytery of Chicago. The dinner is part of a covenant that commits the two groups to working together for the common good with a “genuine concern for the well-being of the other.”

Today these lines exist within family units and within individuals themselves. The landscape of difference is not only a social landscape that we can grasp by mapping out who sits where in a cafeteria. It is also an interior landscape that consists of loyalties and commitments that sometimes overlap and at other times compete with one another.

In a *Huffington Post* blog post written soon after the bombings at the Boston marathon, Eboo Patel, the founder of Interfaith Youth Core, wrote about how intimately most Americans know the experience of having to make sense of their multiple loyalties. “In America, just about everyone is some sort of hyphenated hybrid of race, religion, and ethnicity/nationality. Irish-Catholic-American, African-American, Pentecostal, Jewish-American secular humanist, and so on.” Given this reality, if Americans were asked to complete Tatum’s sentence “I am _____,” increasingly we would likely fill in the blank with a hyphenated descriptor. About our hyphenated identities, Patel went on to write, “In a nation of hybrids, it’s important to have loyalty to both sides of the hyphen.”

In my own case, I married into a family that includes Roman Catholic parents-in-law, one Jewish brother-in-law, two Muslim brothers-in-law, and just one other Protestant. If we were to identify our whole family identity, we would need many hyphens indeed.

Wanting to gain more insight into how to live with religious difference, I turned a few years ago to a rabbi and an imam to see if we might together hold a monthly dialogue on interfaith homes and families. What the three of us shared in common was the conviction that our religions are indispensable resources for American families, who are increasingly becoming hyphenated. Too often our religions are perceived as barriers to overcome or as baggage to discard, and so people opt not to engage in any religious community at all. The rabbi, imam, and I agreed that this was the worst of all options.

At the monthly dialogues—mostly for premarital and newly married couples, as well as for some grandparents—we tried to provide an alternative option. Discussing practical topics like “How Do You Handle the In-laws” or “How Will We Raise Our Children,” we each draw on our different religions to make sense of and integrate our deepest loyalties.

What we have found in these dialogues with interfaith families is that each member is called to be equally self-conscious about his or her faith. Each person in the relationship bears the responsibility of articulating who he is, what she values, and to whom and what he is committed, so that in their hybrid, hyphenated identities they can be loyal to both sides of the hyphen. CC

Culpa

You can snarl and rage and roar and snipe at thugs and liars, Sure you can, and right you are for doing so, and you maybe Actually *enjoy* letting the lava soar out all righteously, right? But even so, there are lies inside you like viruses. You know What I am talking about; we don’t need to go into any detail. And we have been too familiar with a little thuggery, haven’t We? Not battery: You’ll say, rightfully, that you are innocent. No: I mean the times you *knew* about assault and battery, and Did zero. We just stood there. We pretend to be fascinated By something else that just happened to be happily elsewhere. We turned our heads, so it looked like we just hadn’t *noticed*; We can surely be excused if we didn’t see it, right? Right?

Brian Doyle

Insurgents displace Nigerian Christians

In the violence inflicted by Boko Haram insurgents in northeastern Nigeria, the Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria) has been increasingly caught in the middle.

Samuel Dante Dali, EYN president, called for urgent help from the international community in a letter he sent to the Church of the Brethren in the United States in November.

"The future of Nigeria is getting darker and darker day by day, but Nigerian political leadership does not seem to take the suffering of the people very seriously," he said. "The government of Nigeria with all its security seems very weak and helpless in handling the crisis."

In the past year many EYN churches have been destroyed, thousands of church members have been killed, and pastors and their families have been abducted in addition to the hundreds of schoolgirls from Chibok. (Most of their families are part of the EYN.) More than 90,000 EYN members—from a total of 160,000, according to the World Council of Churches, of which EYN is a member—have been displaced by the fighting this year.

At the end of October, Boko Haram seized EYN headquarters and Kulp Bible College, a denominational partner. The denominational staff is now displaced, but church leaders are working with international partners to provide food and shelter to those who have fled the violence.

"Mostly these people are sleeping in open air with little or nothing to eat," Dali wrote. "We have been able to assist many of the families and pastors through the leadership of the District Church Councils."

In the denomination's temporary offices, Dali has received requests from

pastors and others who need places to relocate.

"Also, it is very difficult to know how many have been killed, kidnapped, and no one knows what is happening with our properties at headquarters," he wrote. "We have cried emotionally and to God for help."

The takeover also leads to the loss of an EYN Rural Development Program agriculture project that had been providing eggs for local markets.

"They were known for the quality of their products and filled a niche in the region that in other parts of the world would be filled by either government agencies or private enterprise," said Jeffrey S. Boshart, who manages the Global Food Crisis Fund for the Church of the Brethren.

The manager of the project in Nigeria, who is not named for safety reasons, said that after being displaced from the headquarters in September, staff returned daily to care for the poultry flock until the day of the attack on the EYN headquarters. The manager then fled with his family and Bible college students and others.

"We narrowly escaped gunshots and death," he wrote in an e-mail. "My wife is seven months pregnant, and she was frightened from the gunshots."

He now has difficulty feeding his family, as he left behind food in order to transport more people.

"My staff were scattered and have no help, all we have was spent on farms, and now we leave the produce behind which is no longer ours," he wrote. "We desper-



AID ARRIVING: Internally displaced people, who are not named for safety reasons, stay at an interreligious relocation site formed with leadership from Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria, or the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. Brethren Disaster Ministries and the Global Mission and Service department of the U.S. Church of the Brethren are partnering with EYN to provide food and supplies.

PHOTO BY DAVID SOLLENGER

ately need your intensive prayers, because we Christians have no land to stay in the north, or shall we relocate ourselves to the south?"

Southern Nigeria is predominantly Christian. The nation has the largest number of Christians of any sub-Saharan African country, with 50.8 percent of the population being Christian, according to the Pew Research Center's 2011 Global Christianity report. EYN is the largest Christian denomination in the part of northeast Nigeria where Boko Haram is operating. The first Brethren mission settlement in the 1920s was in Garkida, a village now under attack by Boko Haram. When missionaries settled there, after being directed to the area by the British colonial government, they received approval from community leaders, including Muslims. —Church of the Brethren (U.S.) and World Council of Churches

Federal court of appeals reverses judge's decision on clergy housing taxes

A federal court of appeals rejected a case brought by an atheist organization that would have declared tax-exempt clergy housing allowances unconstitutional.

The November 13 ruling overturns a 2013 decision by U.S. District Court judge Barbara Crabb, who had ruled that the exemption "provides a benefit to religious persons and no one else, even though doing so is not necessary to alleviate a special burden on religious exercise."

But the Freedom from Religion Foundation, a First Amendment watchdog group based in Madison, Wisconsin, that has pursued the case since 2011, is not dropping the case. Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF's copresident, said FFRF was reconsidering its legal options. The only venue left to hear the case would be the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Chicago-based Seventh U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals overturned Crabb's ruling because it found Gaylor and FFRF lacked "standing"—meaning they had no right to sue because the law did not affect them.

Gaylor and Dan Barker, copresident and an ordained minister, did not seek a housing allowance for themselves under the law.

"Dan took the allowance when he was a minister, but now that he is head of the largest atheist and agnostic organization in the country, he cannot take it," Gaylor said. "That clearly shows preference for religion."

The exemption is worth about \$700 million per year, according to the Joint Committee on Taxation's Estimate of Federal Tax Expenditure.

"Society has tried to relieve the clergy's housing burden because of the tremendous social benefits churches offer the culture," said Tony Perkins, president of the Washington-based Family Research Council. Most clergy, "despite their exceptional educations, receive only modest salaries."

The Orthodox Union, which represents Orthodox Jews, noted that the housing allowance helps many rabbis live in homes they might not otherwise be able to afford because "congregational rabbis and other clergy members must reside within walking distance to their synagogues"; observant Jews do not drive on the Sabbath or most holidays. —Kimberly Winston, Religion News Service

Egypt's Christians, attacked for supporting coup leader, await rebuilding

At the Amir Tadros Church in Minya, worshipers pray in what amounts to a building site. Nestled among the scaffolding, a bright blue sign proclaims that work will be completed by June. This past June.

The church in this Upper Egyptian city of a quarter million people, home to one of the largest concentrations of Egypt's Coptic Christian minority, was one of dozens of Christian properties and places of worship destroyed across Egypt on August 14, 2013.

In Minya, mobs chanting Islamist slogans led the charge, looting and burning in response to a state-led massacre



PHOTO BY B-E-M (CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE)

ATTACKED MINORITY: Crosses appear on residence walls in Minya, Egypt. The area is home to one of the largest concentrations of Egypt's Coptic Christians.

unfolding 150 miles away in Cairo, where Muslim Brotherhood-backed demonstrators were protesting the military coup that overthrew the democratically elected Islamist president, Mohamed Morsi.

Egypt's Christian community, about 10 percent of the country's 84 million people, usually defers to the authority of the leader of the day, wary of marginalizing itself further. But the Coptic Church, representing the majority of Egypt's Christians, threw its weight behind Morsi's overthrow. Pope Tadros even stood behind Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, then the army chief and now president, as he announced the military's takeover in a televised address.

By sunrise that August 15, the Amir Tadros Church had been reduced to four scorched walls, encasing only rubble and ash. Although Egypt's army has promised to rebuild this and other churches, there's been little progress. By some estimates, only 10 percent of the work has been completed nationwide.

In recent comments to state media, Bishop Makarios of Minya has affirmed that the rebuilding is ongoing and asked for more security around church buildings. Calls to the Egyptian Defense Ministry elicited no response.

A walk through downtown Minya reveals the haphazard nature of the

rebuilding plan. On one street stands a Christian-owned orphanage, its grounds and interior still gutted. Up the road, children's laughter echoes from the playground of the newly rebuilt Sisters of St. Joseph school.

"There's no transparency," said Nady Khalil, general coordinator at a Catholic development organization in Minya. "From time to time we hear the army will rebuild something else, but no one explains when it will happen or how it will be funded."

Privately owned Christian properties are faring better. Most have been rebuilt with local money. Shop owners say they did not expect help from the state but were disappointed when their insurance companies did not pay out.

"We had to turn to the people," said restaurant owner Maged Amin. "It was a very difficult time."

Flames had eaten away at his restaurant's foundations, costing his family 25,000 Egyptian pounds (\$3,500) to rebuild.

"I'm just thankful they're rebuilding our churches, no matter how slow the pace," Amin said. "Last winter, we had to pray in a school—I could not imagine back then that this was my country."

To date Egyptian Christians' loyalty has not brought a significant improvement in their day-to-day lives. Sectarian attacks—often attributed to the Muslim Brotherhood—continue, and the security services maintain a poor record when it comes to preventing violence against Christians.

According to the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, a Cairo-based monitoring group, at least 18 Christians were killed because of their religious identity between June 30, 2013, and September 30, 2014. Further, 165 Christian-owned houses were vandalized or burned down.

Crimes against Christians have routinely gone unpunished, whether under ousted dictator Hosni Mubarak, Morsi, or el-Sisi. While a Minya judge sentenced hundreds of local residents to death over the killing of two policemen on August 14, 2013, not a single person has been prosecuted for the burning of the churches. Minya's attorney general declined to discuss the matter.

Many of Minya's Christian residents say they are not in a position to ask for more.

"We have to be satisfied with this—minority communities can only expect so much," said Marco Adel, a young political activist.

"Of course I'm not entirely happy with the government's efforts, but you have to understand, the current situation is a lot better than it was under Morsi," he said. "Egypt is now a country that Christians believe they can live in."

Khalil, of the Catholic development organization, takes a different view.

"The problems have been the same under Mubarak, Morsi, and el-Sisi," he says. "There is no hope for Egypt if we just rebuild the churches. Unless we invest in people and their institutions, nothing will ever change." —Louisa Loveluck and Mohamed Ezz, *The Christian Science Monitor*

Tensions rise in Jerusalem over site of Temple Mount and Dome of the Rock

A site holy to both Jews and Muslims, the Temple Mount—known as the Haram al-Sharif to Muslims—is at the center of an intense debate.

Tensions were sparked in late October by the attempted assassination of Yehuda Glick, an advocate for building a third Jewish temple on the Temple Mount. He is also at the forefront of a campaign to allow Jewish prayers at the site, believed to be where two Jewish temples stood thousands of years ago. Israel currently bans Jews from praying on the plateau because it wants to prevent clashes with Muslims worshiping at the nearby Noble Sanctuary, a mosque considered to be Islam's third-holiest site.

Glick was hospitalized with four bullet wounds in the chest. Afterward, Israelis and Palestinians ramped up violence and traded recriminations over whether Glick and like-minded activists are responsible for the clashes.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has blamed "terrorists" for the clashes over Temple Mount. On November 10, he ordered his security cabinet to increase the number of security forces on

the ground and move forward on the demolition of "terrorists' homes."

The next day, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, speaking in Ramallah at an event marking the tenth anniversary of the death of the former PLO leader Yasser Arafat, said Israel's settlement policies and actions at the Temple Mount have led to a "detrimental religious war."

The conflict has created rifts in the Jewish community, too.

Ignoring Netanyahu's call for restraint, Moshe Feiglin, deputy Knesset speaker, went to the Temple Mount and vowed to "change the reality" of a ban on Jewish prayer at the site.

Later, Yitzhak Yosef, Sephardi chief rabbi of Israel, spoke at the funeral of a teenager who was the victim of a Palestinian attack at a Jerusalem light rail station in early November.

"We need to stop the incitement provoked by people going to the Temple Mount," Yosef said, according to Israeli news site Ynet.

Motti Inbari, a religion professor at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, worries about the increasingly popular campaign to build a third temple—a proposal that would fan the flames of hatred against Jews around the Middle East.

Inbari noted how advocates of a third temple recently posted a video on Facebook and YouTube that uses computer-generated graphics to illustrate a recon-



CONTESTED HOLY SITE: The Dome of the Rock rises behind the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, where tensions have been high over the Temple Mount, a holy site for both Jews and Muslims.

structed shrine on the Temple Mount. The video then links to an online fund-raising campaign that has generated \$104,814 toward the construction of the temple.

In the video, “you don’t see any mosques on the Mount,” said Inbari, who specializes in studying fundamentalist movements. “The clip suggests that the temple replaces the mosques on the Mount. This can explain why Muslims are nervous.”

Inbari said Temple Mount activists mobilized financial and political support in Israel, particularly through the Temple Institute, a Jerusalem-based nonprofit dedicated to rebuilding the temple.

“The Temple Institute is supported with millions of shekels by the state every year,” he said. “They get money from the Ministry of Religious affairs and the Education Ministry, and even the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption is giving them money, so it is already part of the mainstream being supported by the state.”

The tensions have sparked concerns in Jordan also. Jordan has been the official guardian of the Noble Sanctuary and other Islamic institutions in Jerusalem since 1919, a status reaffirmed in the 1994 peace treaty with Israel.

Jordan withdrew its ambassador from Tel Aviv in early November after Israeli police instituted closures at the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Wasfi Kailani, director of the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for the Restoration of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock—the two buildings that make up the Noble Sanctuary—said Glick and his compatriots are dangerous.

Just how influential Glick and other third-temple enthusiasts are is debatable. Several lawmakers from Netanyahu’s ruling coalition were in attendance at the seminar in Jerusalem where Glick was speaking before he was shot. And after being removed from a respirator, Glick called Knesset speaker Yuli-Yoel Edelstein, a member of Netanyahu’s Likud party, according to Israel’s Channel 7 website.

But Mordechai Kedar, an Arabic language lecturer at Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv, rejected the idea that Temple Mount activists were influential.

“I know Yehuda Glick—he’s one of a

handful of lunatics who represent nobody but themselves,” Kedar said.

Kedar insists that Palestinian leadership has provoked the crisis in Jerusalem. He criticized Abbas for sending a condolence letter to the family of the suspect in Glick’s shooting, Mutaz Hijazi, who was killed by Israeli police at his home the morning after the attack.

“The Temple Mount activists are not violent,” Kedar said. “They just work on the Jewish right to pray at the Temple Mount.” —Jacob Wirtschafter and Ori Weisberg, Religion News Service

After ten years of debate, Jerusalem elects rabbis for its two top positions

After more than a decade of rancorous debates and court decisions over the election of two chief rabbis of Jerusalem, Aryeh Stern and Shlomo Amar were chosen for the roles.

By tradition Jerusalem has two chief rabbis, one who is Sephardic and one who is Ashkenazi. Sephardic Jews descend from communities in Spain and Northern Africa. Ashkenazi communities developed in Central Europe.

The positions had been open since the previous rabbis died. Among the conflicts that arose afterward was an argument over who would be allowed to vote. Traditionally, the voting was spread among members of the Municipal Council of Jerusalem. This would have involved 48 people representing a variety of opinions but skewed toward the ultra-Orthodox because of the way the council is set up. Zionists campaigned for 12 of the 48 votes to be cast by representatives from synagogues throughout the city. The decision was taken as far as the High Court, which adjudicated according to a scheme whereby four votes went to synagogues of Zionist persuasions, four to Sephardic synagogues, and four to the ultra-Orthodox. (The ultra-Orthodox may be described as anti-Zionist, for they reject the legitimacy of the state of Israel.)

There was an attempt to postpone the



PHOTO BY MARC ISRAEL SELLEM

LONG WAIT: After ten years, Shlomo Amar and Aryeh Stern were elected chief rabbis of Jerusalem.

vote until Stern—the main Zionist contender—reached the age of 70, at which point he would be ineligible. However, partly through the work of Stern’s followers, elections finally got under way at the end of October, just two months before Stern’s 70th birthday. Amar is 66.

Other candidates had included Shmuel Eliyahu, who as chief rabbi of the city of Safed put out a fiat that forbade Israel Jews from selling or even renting property to Arabs. Although he later apologized, the damage was done. He lost, but he was supported by the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Party and won 18 votes (out of a possible 48).

Another Ashkenazi candidate, Moshe Chaim Lau, ran on an ultra-Orthodox ticket and received 20 votes as opposed to Stern’s 27.

Stern was supported by Nir Barkat, mayor of Jerusalem, and Naftali Bennett, who heads the Jewish Home party in the Knesset. Stern, who was born in Israel, has a background in *yeshivot* (rabbinical seminaries) and set up an institute to clarify Jewish legal issues. He was a community rabbi in Jerusalem for many years.

Barkat also supported Amar for one of the positions. Amar, who was born in Morocco and immigrated to Israel at age 14, was previously chief rabbi of Israel. Although ultra-Orthodox, he was opposed by the national leader of the ultras, Aryeh Steinman, for supporting conversion in the army (mainly of Russian immigrants). His books include Jewish legal decisions about Israel’s agriculture, *kashrut* (laws of food), and clinical death. —Mordechai Beck, for CHRISTIAN CENTURY

People



■ **Abdisaid Abdi Ismail**, a Somali scholar, published a book this fall questioning use of the death penalty for apostasy in Islam, a book he said furthers the voice of Muslim intellectuals and clerics who are increasingly rejecting the abuse of Islam by extremist groups.

Written in the Somali language, *The Rule of Apostasy in Islam: Is It True?* is being read in cities such as London, Toronto, and Minneapolis, where there are large populations of ethnic Somalis. It is selling secretly in Kenya and Somalia after booksellers removed it from their shelves in the wake of Muslim clergy protests.

Ismail's concern is that extremist groups are applying apostasy as a political tool. He has watched Somalia's al-Shabaab justify the killing of those who oppose their hard-line interpretation of the Qur'an by branding them apostates.

"What we need are secular states where there is democracy, justice, and equality for all," he said. "Not theocratic ones where leaders rule by the name of God."

Ismail, 50, who has written four other books on globalization and economics, traveled to Kenya to publish his latest book since he could not find a willing publisher in Somalia. He hoped it would stimulate a debate on religious freedom in Islam. The book also touches on issues such as gender equality and stoning adulterers.

Ismail said that since the book's launch, he has received death threats and warnings not to return to Somalia, where his wife and three children still live. Radical clerics have called for the banning and burning of his book.

"Every day, I fear fanatical supporters of Somali extremists here in Kenya, and

[in] Somalia, may harm me," he said.
—Fredrick Nzwili, Religion News Service

■ **Kawal Tagore**, a Sikh accountant, won a settlement from the U.S. government that will open the doors of federal buildings to many of her fellow Sikhs around the country.



Tagore worked at the Internal Revenue Service in 2005 when she was baptized in the Sikh faith. She wore a kirpan, a ceremonial knife reminding the wearer of a Sikh's duty to protect the weak and promote justice for all, to work. Her supervisor asked her to leave, and she was later fired.

There is no prescribed length for the kirpan, one of five articles of faith maintained by Sikhs; hers was three inches long and duller than a butter knife. Her lawyers argued that the policy was discriminatory because the same building permitted pocketknives as well as objects such as scissors.

The settlement with Department of Homeland Security in early November included no admission of wrongdoing. DHS did not respond to requests for comment.

In 2012, Tagore's case also prompted the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Protective Service to set up an accommodation policy for Sikhs so that they can apply to bring their kirpan into federal buildings.

Part of the settlement is that FPS will continue to educate staff about that policy. In October, when she arrived at court in Houston, she had already received permission from the judge to carry her kirpan. She followed instructions to present it for inspection, but her lawyers say U.S. marshals pinned down her arm, seized the kirpan, and questioned her about her citizenship (she is a U.S. citizen). When she returned a few days later, some education had taken place, and the marshals "were very gracious and respectful," said Daniel Blomberg, legal counsel for the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty in Washington.

Tagore's record has been cleared so

that she can seek employment again with the federal government, although she is not currently employed by the government. And she's been given permission to carry her kirpan to federal buildings relevant to her work—Stacy Teicher Khadaroo, *The Christian Science Monitor*

■ The National Council of Churches hired two new staff members: **Aundreia Alexander** will begin as an associate general secretary for action and advocacy for justice and peace in early January. **Steven D. Martin** began in early November as director of communications and development. Both will work in the NCC's Washington, D.C., office.

Alexander, an attorney and ordained minister, has led the American Baptist Churches USA's efforts to advocate for a comprehensive humane immigration law in the United States. For the past several years she has also advocated for human rights and religious liberty issues related to the diaspora of the ethnic peoples of Burma. She has recently worked closely with the World Council of Churches and the United Nations on addressing the plight of stateless people. She also brings her background in conflict resolution to the NCC as an advocate for peace and justice.

Martin is an ordained United Methodist elder. For the past eight years he has led Vital Visions, a nonprofit focused on creating media for the purpose of peace-making and understanding, and he has produced films shown on PBS stations nationwide. He is best known for his three films that detail the role of Christian leaders during the early years of the Nazi regime, which are archived in the permanent collections at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Jerusalem's Yad Vashem, the world center for research and education on the Holocaust. He was also one of the founders of the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good.

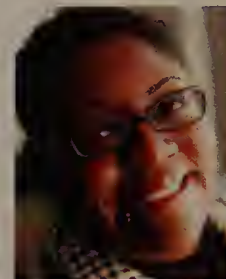


PHOTO BY STEVEN MARTIN

PHOTO BY LINDA DAVIDSON

LIVING BY The Word

Sunday, December 14
Luke 1:46b–55

THE SANCTUARY of the congregation I serve is built into the ground, with two stories of windows rising from its lowest level. The glass windows—some lightly stained and some clear—show through to an area outside meant to evoke a canyon.

Using stretches of wall that cross the windows, an artist named Sam Terry created a complex work. It begins with large tree roots seeming to come up on one side from water rolling over boulders and on the other side from the base of the pulpit. The roots grow into a massive, gnarly, infertile-looking trunk that appears to be almost dying. She crafted it from random pieces of desert ironwood shaped with epoxy. As you look up, this trunk becomes a cross. The longer of its two arms stretches as far as it can, as if it is reaching for something it can't grasp. It is bent, just slightly, where an elbow might be. The end just slightly suggests a clenched fist.

To the left of that strong arm there is a narrow gap running diagonally. The crevice dips down into the trunk and stretches up toward the top, slicing across the cross's center. One has to jump over the gap to see the shorter arm, which looks nothing like its opposite. The left arm doesn't grasp. It isn't thin or knotty. It doesn't ache from weight or pain of death. It appears not in the heavy gray of ironwood but in the warm brown tones of African walnut. It is smoothed, polished, and alive.

Terry describes the piece as the tree of life grown into a cross showing the hardness of the human heart—which is then, again, transformed. It is the transformation of the heart in the face of the cross of grace.

This might not sound much like an Advent image at first. But perhaps young Mary walks through that crevice between the old and the new as she flees, with the weight of the world on her, to the arms of her loving cousin. There, loved, she hears words rooted deep in her tradition—words of calling to the prophets, of God's vision of compassion for the weak and victory against injustice. And she comes to terms. This girl you would not expect to be the hand of God now receives, accepts, and resolves to return home to do the work given her to do.

To psychologize the text, it seems to me that the song she sings shows the flow of the same spiritual transformation one sees in that cross. The song marks a transformation from seeing her condition's weight to receiving a new power within the situation, to recognizing that the giver is the actual gift. She is less an object of uncertainty and more a receiver of an empowering spirit. And then, finally, she is a participant in the work of

Reflections on the lectionary

that very spirit—God's spirit. Her life becomes part of a larger drama in which she both loses and finds herself. It's God's drama, and it's Mary's blessing.

The song begins by recognizing this blessing. It then jumps the gap, changes in tone, and rings with parallelisms that sing poetic images of the character of the one who blesses. The God who blesses does so with mercy, strength, purpose, and provision.

"His mercy is for those who fear him." Maybe mercy comes when we give up the dream of controlling God, or of reducing truth to our own size, declining to accept any mystery in God or God's creation. Maybe mercy comes when we stop trying to make it on our own, or to build new Babels, or to heal every ill by our own wit, or to shout judgment before listening.

"He has shown strength with his arm" to scatter the proud who have only their own dreams or their own goals, who are deaf to God's purpose. The arm in pain becomes the arm of strength, which becomes the arm of embrace.

"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly." Mary, the lowly one, is now given her place, her throne—which is, of course, not hers but is the throne of one she carries. So too for all who are seen as lowly in the eyes of the powerful. We preach that there is no life that is finally god-forsaken. The intrigues of power that fascinate us are insignificant to the work of love. They can even get in the way and may need to be set aside for that more purposeful way of life.

"He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." In God's mercy, strength, and purpose, there is provision. There is no hoarding in what Mary imagines, no scarcity, no pain of empty stomachs. The movement between the old and the new is not a jump after all, but more of a giving over. Abundance is possible only when there is a true and broad sharing, a giving of grace, and a blessing.

Mary's song is part of the long history of how God has used those who will let their lives be larger than themselves, who will see their strength not in their own accomplishment but in accepting their place in that larger work, who will not grab power for themselves but will use power for good, and who see these blessings as reason enough for all to receive.

Somehow I hear this song not just as an Advent song but also as an Easter song at the foot of that cross. I hear in it a song of the heart's transformation, rooted by the waters of tradition and the power of blessing, seeing the beauty of a divine vision for all the world.

The author is Wes Avram, senior pastor of Pinnacle Presbyterian Church in Scottsdale, Arizona, and author of Where the Light Shines Through: Discerning God in Everyday Life (Brazos).

LIVING BY The Word

Sunday, December 21

2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16; Luke 1:26–38

I LOVE BUILDINGS, especially beautiful places of worship. I also think there's power in a cinder-block square with a tin roof or the circle of a campfire, if they're filled by songs and prayer. I used to serve a campus ministry that owned two houses. Both were in disrepair. We talked a lot, sometimes emotionally, about what to do. Borrowing the image of God's tabernacling presence with wandering Hebrews, a new pastor made a good case for no buildings and for creating a ministry of roaming presence. Others spoke of the value of *home*, of creating an inviting physical space of ministry.

I'm taken back to that discussion by the resonance of God's word to Nathan and Gabriel's word to Mary. I think this holds a tension that's at the heart of biblical faith. Nathan gives a word in response to David's plan to build a house for God. Gabriel tells Mary that her womb will become a home for the one who will fulfill the divine word given to Nathan so long before.

Political intrigues aside, at face value David is trying to honor God as he and his people settle into a time of growing national identity. They've carried the marker of God among them in a tent while David has been built a house of cedar. It seems unseemly; he must construct a house for the Lord, too. This David tells Nathan. Nathan does not object.

But that night, Nathan hears more. It sounds like God is almost embarrassed: *Through all we've been through together, have I ever asked for a house? In all the ways I've been faithful, have I ever required more than a tent as fragile and as movable as your security, and as close to you as the hope that carries you forward?* Then Nathan recites the promise that some say is the summit of the Hebrew Bible. God's presence is made sure not just in a project for that generation, but in a covenant with all generations forever.

The tension returns. It's OK to build buildings. The effort isn't quashed, at least not in the long term. And yet God's presence is assured not in the building, but in the promise.

How, then, is the promise met? Is it in the coming to be of what's promised—endless security, prosperity, honor, and peace? History seems to betray this God, even make this God a liar. Or is God's fidelity assured in the promising itself, in our experience of the creating God as a promising God? Is it in our mysterious ability to harness a power from beyond us to live in both freedom and hope? Is it in our sense that there's a prom-

ise at the heart of all creation, at the heart of our very being, at the center of what makes God's people God's? Is it in an intuition that is the promise of a saving, resolving, reconciling love, against evidence to the contrary?

During the years we were talking about buildings at that campus ministry, I read Georges Gusdorf's classic little book in phenomenology, *Speaking (La Parole)*. Gusdorf decides that the thing most distinctive, most persistent, and most defining in human language—compared to other forms of communication—is the making of promises. We betray ourselves when we betray a promise. We *become* ourselves, and so become human, when we make and fulfill loving commitments, forgive broken intentions, and see ourselves by virtue of the life-giving promises.

My teen years were in many ways shaped by word of this kind of promise from the pulpit, in the preaching of Timothy Hickey. Week after week I heard a simple affirmation at the heart of scripture. Hickey refused to define this affirmation any more than by exploring the creative tensions it generates. It occasionally bubbled up into words: that in the end, through it all, "God's final answer is always yes." It is the message of hope that makes the tensions of life creative.

It looks like delusion to cling to an expectation of something that the facts suggest will never happen. Yet there's a way of doing this, which we also call *faith*. We do our best to build

We become human when we make and fulfill loving commitments.

the conditions needed to let the promise be realized, not because the responsibility is on us but because we believe the promise is real. We believe its realization is inevitable, even if beyond our view. To the eyes of faith, the delusion lies in losing that creative tension between our work and our hope.

We make a home in the world for the hope we find in the one promised. We make this home in order to remember—to let the promise be born among us, grow among us, and bring us a future if it will. We find faith in trusting that it will.

The answer, then, is in both the promise and the promising. It's in the words of Nathan to David, in the words of Gabriel received by Mary, in the life of Mary's child, and in our own work to make a home for this child and build his future. It's God's yes, which is our future too.

The author is Wes Avram, senior pastor of Pinnacle Presbyterian Church in Scottsdale, Arizona, and author of *Where the Light Shines Through: Discerning God in Everyday Life (Brazos)*.

Nativity, December 24 and 25

Luke 2:1–14 (15–20)

IT IS ROUGHLY 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. According to Google Maps, it would take 34 hours to travel it on foot, not counting stops for rest. And of course Google does not factor in contingencies such as marauding bandits, deep rain-washed wadis cutting through the path, inns with no room, or full-term pregnancies. But this long, wearying, unpredictable journey is, according to Luke, precisely what Joseph and Mary undertake.

It is not as though they have a choice. This is no vacation jaunt to the old home place. Caesar Augustus has spoken, and like it or not, everybody has to register in the town of their ancestry. Joseph lives in Nazareth but has roots in Bethlehem, and that is that. Days and days of perilous travel ensue, Mary's water threatening to break at any minute, and the whole dangerous, exhausting journey is just to fill out some government forms. Compared to this, two hours spent languishing in the DMV waiting room seems hardly worth grumbling over.

Historians report that they can find little evidence of this census, but their search is mostly beside the point. For Luke, the mandate from Rome and the journey of two peasants from Galilee to Judea are not primarily geographical or historical matters but theological ones. The question for Luke is where hope might be found for people like Mary and Joseph. They are, like poor and defenseless people everywhere and in every time, at the whim of whatever caesar or mindless bureaucracy or uncaring machinery of state happens to lash out in their direction. Caesar issues a decree, drinks another glass of wine, eats a cluster of grapes—and Joseph and Mary pack provisions and head out on the Roman road to Judea.

In Pieter Bruegel's painting *The Numbering at Bethlehem*, one has to search hard to find Mary and Joseph among the village rustics crowding into town. They have disappeared into the anonymity of the powerless. The irony is that while Joseph, Mary, and their unborn child are headed to Bethlehem to be counted, in fact they do not count, not to Rome anyway. They are faceless nobodies under the boot of an uncaring empire. Their only hope—if they have any hope at all—is not in Caesar Augustus, who commands their trek, but in the God of Israel, who accompanies them even when they walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

As American power and affluence increased over the last century, hope became a casualty. We became more confident of our strength and promise, and we began to imagine ourselves as those who need no hope. Who needs hope when you have unfettered progress? Instead, we began to express our longings for the future as “hope nots”: I hope the stock market doesn't

crash again. I hope my children don't get hooked on drugs. I hope I don't get Alzheimer's when I get old—all expressions of the fact that we were steaming ahead complacently, simply hoping that no icebergs lay in our path.

If faith “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1), then we soon lost faith because the things we could see, hold, and store up were simply more satisfying. With a firm grip on the good life, we no longer needed to open our hands in prayer. In *Hope Against Hope*, theologians Trevor Hart and Richard Bauckham observe that societies fueled by progress tend to mark time as the march of centuries, confident that each new century trumps all previous ones, a self-assurance that “allows one to focus on the continuous, forward-moving advance, ignoring the discontinuities and the tragic losses of real history.”

But now it is virtually impossible to ignore the discontinuities and tragic losses. With economies faltering and glaciers melting and terrorists striking, with taxes going toward drones and futile wars, and with electronic invasions of privacy by our own government, we have at least been disabused of the illusion that we need no hope beyond our own resources. We are now all Josephs and Marys, compelled by some distant caesar to travel the weary road.

**If we are no longer confident of progress,
maybe we are ready for the hope and
wonder of Bethlehem.**

But the road leads to Bethlehem, and a manger of surprising hope awaits us there. “We felt that we had received the sentence of death,” writes Paul in 2 Corinthians, “so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer compares life in a prison cell to the hope of Advent: “One waits, hopes, does this, that, or the other—things that are really of no consequence—the door is shut and can only be opened *from the outside*.”

No longer confident of progress, no longer believing Caesar's empty promise of peace, maybe we are ready again for the hope and wonder of Bethlehem. Like Joseph, we are exhausted by the forced march of greedy empires, but like pregnant Mary, we suddenly realize that we have been carrying the true hope all along: God with us. Listen! Hear once again, sounding over Bethlehem, the angels' hopeful song of the only peace worth trusting.

The author is Thomas G. Long, who teaches at Emory University's Candler School of Theology and is the author of Preaching from Memory to Hope.

TO GIVE & TO RECEIVE

Christmas recommendations from CENTURY editors and columnists



PHILIP JENKINS

To give

If you know anyone interested in history, religion, art, or travel, or who simply has an interest in superb writing, alert him to Patrick Leigh Fermor, arguably the finest English-language travel writer of the last century. His trilogy records his teenaged odyssey from England to Constantinople in the mid-1930s. An excellent way to get into his writings is through Artemis Cooper's recent biography, *Patrick Leigh Fermor: An Adventure*.

Over the last three decades Britain has enjoyed a wonderful flowering of what we broadly call folk music, but which is wide-ranging in its integration of contemporary styles with traditional materials. After fierce internal debate, my choice for this year is *The Moral of the Elephant*, by Martin Carthy and his daughter Eliza Carthy. It's a lovely collection of songs, with virtuoso performances on guitar and fiddle.

I would give the DVD of the 2013 film *Before Midnight*, but packaged with its two predecessors in the trilogy. Individually, each of these films is poignant and richly entertaining. Together,

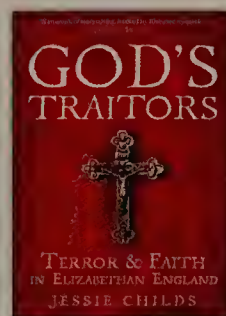


er, they are a major work of contemporary fiction. (Part of *Before Midnight* was filmed in Patrick Leigh Fermor's house in Greece.)

To receive

Leading my own wish list is the two-volume omnibus edition of Neil Gaiman's graphic novel series *The Sandman*. In addition to their visual splendors, Gaiman's stories use a dazzlingly broad range of cultural and mythological reference, including G. K. Chesterton as one in an extensive list of characters. If these books weren't consigned to the ghetto reserved for graphic novels, few critics would hesitate to include them among the triumphs of contemporary literature.

If you grew up in Britain and had the slightest interest in matters religious, you would be fascinated by the bloody persecutions that Protestant regimes inflicted on Catholic dissidents. Each side, in its way, was absolutely right in its attitudes to faith and politics, and both were totally wrong. Jessie Childs's book *God's Traitors: Terror and Faith in Elizabethan England* is a story of religious conflict set in a world of secret policing and informers, traitors and apostates, torturers and assassins—but all, alarmingly, in a familiar English setting.



As a science fiction classic, Frank Herbert's *Dune* cried out for epic treatment in the cinema. (David Lynch's 1984 version was a horrible letdown.) Even so, *Dune* did inspire "the greatest movie never made." Alejandro Jodorowsky planned a wildly ambitious treatment of the book, using major figures in music, art, and graphic design. The project never came to fruition but is the subject of the film *Jodorowsky's Dune* (on Blu-Ray). It's a gorgeous evocation of the creative process at work.

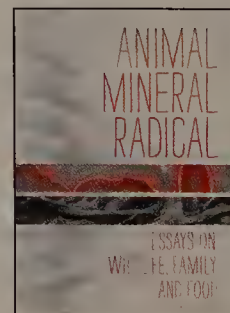


AMY FRYKHOLM

To give

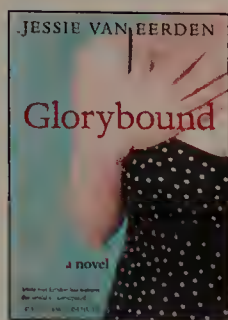
I found *Gilead* such a complete experience that I didn't feel a need to know more about Lila, a secondary character in the book. But in Marilynne Robinson's new book, *Lila*, her occupation of this young woman's thoughts and experience is so musical and convincing that I've read the novel twice and recommend it far and wide. (See my review, p. 42.)

BK Loren won the Colorado Book Award this year for *Animal, Mineral, Radical: Essays on Wildlife, Family, and Food*. In these personal essays on



environment, friendship, language, and family, the language is rich, deep, and careful, and Loren's illumination of the ordinary is rewarding.

Glorybound includes snake handlers, foot-washing, and vows of silence and chastity. Jessie van Eerden takes the reader into the lives of two sisters in a dying West Virginia coal-mining town. The book is graceful and hopeful and strange.

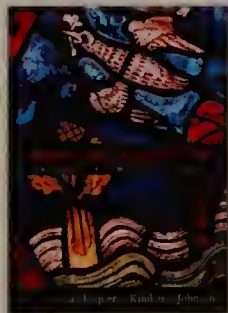


Christian Wiman's relentless pursuit of a viable and living language for faith continues in *Once in the West*, his first collection of poems since moving from *Poetry* magazine to a position at Yale Divinity School. I will read and reread these poems.

To receive

Nominated for the National Book Award in poetry, Fanny Howe fascinates me with her strange imagery and religious engagement. *Second Childhood* is a meditation on aging.

Before the Door of God: An Anthology of Devotional Poetry is a doorstep of a book. Editors Jay Hopler and Kimberly Johnson cover the personal lyric from its most ancient origins in Western civilization to the present moment.



The Basement Tapes Complete: The Bootleg Series Vol. 11 is called "the Holy Grail" for fans of Bob Dylan. The series gathers together all his poetry and music in one place. The music shows the singer-songwriter in process at perhaps the most creative moment of his life.

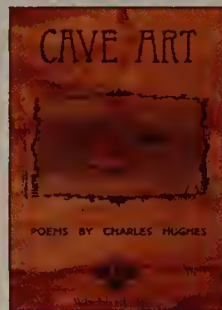
Veronica Mary Rolf's book *Julian's Gospel: Illuminating the Life and Revelations of Julian of Norwich* has won several awards for its meditation on both her life and her theology.

JILL PELÁEZ BAUMGAERTNER

To give

I will be giving Brian Doyle's *A Shimmer of Something: Lean Stories of Spiritual Substance* to several friends. Doyle, editor of *Portland Magazine* and author of many books, is also a poet popular with CENTURY readers. His "box poems" are rectangular prose poems on subjects as varied as "Mrs. Job," "What a Father Thinks While Driving His Daughter, Age Seventeen, to Rehab," and "Choosing a Baseball Bat." Doyle is a storyteller who points out the mystery of what appears to be the ordinary.

I'll also be giving *Cave Art*, the first book by a retired Chicago attorney, Charles Hughes. His poems are clear and vibrant jewels. Subject matter includes Hughes's memory of a professor reading John Donne's "Valediction Forbidding Mourning" to college freshmen, the joys of fishing, and an elderly man keeping vigil over his dying wife. All of these poems breathe empathy and love, more so than any collection I've read in recent years.



Several of Tania Runyan's poems first appeared in the CENTURY. Runyan is the best of a new crop of poets who are taking on the difficult task of writing about faith in a secular age. In *Second Sky*, she anchors bold meditations in Paul's words and shows how God's grace infuses the mundane. Runyan's poems are not what you'd expect in a volume that ends with a scripture reference index. They question, push the scriptural texts to the limit, struggle, and finally reveal the holy in the ordinary.

To receive

I'd love to receive Scott Cairns's *Idiot Psalms*. Cairns channels both Dostoevsky and the psalmists in this fine collection.

With an epigraph from *The Idiot* and a nod to Prince Myshkin, Cairns embraces the problems and delight of the realization that words "are not exact" and that "God [may be] only dimly apprehended." The psalms are of lament, repentance, and irritation at God's silence. They are sometimes ironic in tone: "You may be entertained to hear how much we find to say / about so little." Finally, however, they opt for mystery and deal with the reality that "all that is explicable / is somewhat less than interesting."

A second book on my wish list is *Night Bus to the Afterlife*, by Peter Cooley, a professor at Tulane and a witness to the devastation of Katrina. He writes of "the world of after-flood."



He seeks reasons, lessons, from Christ. What does resurrection mean, he asks, at a time like this? Cooley adopts a Whitmanesque pose, addressing readers who will read his words after his death, after he has stood in line, "slipping on" his body in the resurrection. Rooted in the terrain of the fallen world, these poems reach toward immortality.

In *I Watched You Disappear*, Anya Krugovoy Silver writes of the close bonds between breast cancer patients (she is a survivor), including the shared loneliness, separation, and distance that are inevitable for anyone facing death. Silver is forthright in describing God's response to a dying friend "with a sobbing of strings. / I can't understand what He's saying." They are occasionally angry and sometimes puzzled, yet these are not bleak poems. I can't get enough of them.



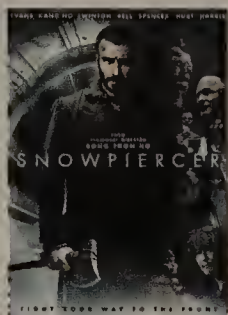
KATHRYN REKLIS

To give

Boyhood, Richard Linklater's epic of everyday life, lingers long after one has

seen it. Filmed on a few days every year for 12 years, the story follows a young boy as he grows from age six to 18. In part a coming-of-age story, in part a meditation on time and the shaping of human character and memory, *Boyhood* is a masterpiece.

In the postapocalyptic thriller *Snowpiercer*, Earth is an icy wasteland and surviving humans circle the globe on a high-speed train. The train is divided into compartments: the poor live in squalor, the rich are swaddled in luxury and escapist drugs. Religious mythology and violence keep the social order intact until a young man leads a revolution. Joon-ho Bong's film is a moral indictment of contemporary social ills and a dystopic Noah story packaged in stunning visuals and camera work.

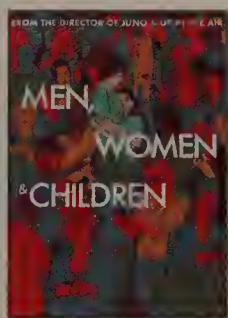


Earlier this year the complete five-season DVD boxed set of the television drama *Breaking Bad* was released (directed by Vince Gilligan). This story of a high school chemistry teacher who is also a regional meth-cooking drug lord gets my vote. Like a Russian novel, the show explores the nooks and crannies of the human soul and the ways that sin corrupts and twists our best intentions.

To receive

A love story about a blind French girl and an orphaned Nazi technician during WWII does not sound like inspiring reading, but by all accounts the book *All the Light We Cannot See*, by Anthony Doerr, is a marvel of observation, sympathy, and lyricism.

Contemporary fiction seldom captures the texture and feel of digitally mediated life. Even Aaron Sorkin's film *The Social Network* was a conventional story about the rise of a tech corporation and not about what it means to live life on Facebook. Although it re-



ceived mixed reviews, Jason Reitman's *Men, Women, & Children* is one of the first films to explore the possibilities and pitfalls of navigating life through our screens.

In their sketch comedy show, Key and Peele irreverently tackle a range of topics "born from their experiences growing up biracial in a not-quite-post-racial world." Jordan Peele's impersonation of Obama is reason enough to put the third season of *Key & Peele* on my list.



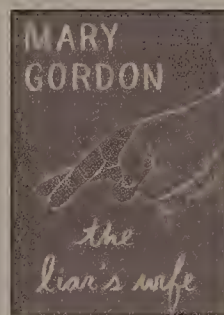
STEPHANIE PAULSELL

To give

René Steinke's third novel, *Friendswood*, explores the effects of an environmental disaster on several families in a small Texas town and the ways religion shapes their fears, hopes, and responses. This is a novel about what we owe one another as neighbors and as human beings, and it reveals the sacredness of human attempts to repair what has been broken.

Fanny Howe, our most mystical poet, explores the ways childhood pulses through an entire life in *Second Childhood*. Howe's language, fragmented yet precise, creates "a place to surmise / blessedness."

Mary Gordon's *The Liar's Wife* includes four exquisite novellas that explore such subjects as Simone Weil's last days in New York City and a teenager's encounter with the novelist Thomas Mann in Gary, Indiana.



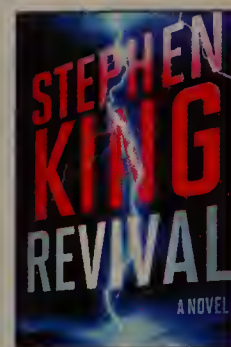
To receive

Virginia Woolf: Art, Life, and Vision is the catalog of an exhibition on Woolf that recently closed at London's National Portrait Gallery. I dearly wish I had seen

the exhibition, but I hope to catch a glimpse of Woolf and her artistry in Frances Spalding's book, which integrates words and images.

All of my students are talking about *Bad Feminist*, a book of essays by Roxane Gay, a novelist and sharp cultural observer who teaches at Eastern Illinois University.

Finally, I want to read one of Stephen King's latest books, *Revival*. One of the main characters is a minister who comes to town with a stunning wife and plans for the church. Who can resist?



DAVID HEIM

To give

I'm a huge fan of *Call the Midwife*, the British series based on the memoirs of Jennifer Worth, a young nurse in the 1950s who served in a midwife program that operated out of an Anglican convent in the East End of London. Each episode follows a crisis pregnancy and reveals social and family issues along the way. In a deft, understated way, using very little Christian language, the show pulls the viewer into a world in which the moral heart of a neighborhood is a dedicated Christian community and the heart of that community is service, rooted in prayer. This series shows that goodness is plausible, earthy, and appealing.

Jesus' parables are profoundly elusive. Even the most straightforward of the stories contains a disturbing surplus of meaning. Richard Lischer's *Reading the Parables* displays the wisdom and imagination of an honest preacher. He neatly summarizes the major scholarly approaches but is always alert to what escapes analysis or typology. Parables, he

reminds us, were first of all verbal performances, and their meaning “arises from the performance.” Jesus’ fondness for them “suggests a method of approaching or experiencing the truth.”

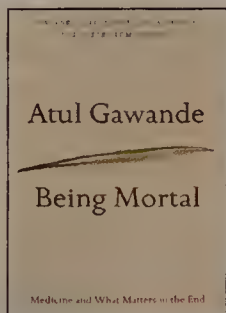
In the film *Calvary*, Irish director John Michael McDonagh has created one of the most satisfying film portrayals of Christian ministry I’ve seen in a long time. Father James is a priest in a town where people think the church is corrupt, Christianity absurd, and priests fools if not child abusers. They enjoy scoffing at him, but he remains fearless and sarcastic, defending the innocent, consoling the afflicted, and speaking the truth. He is an outpost of faith in a world that has rejected the truth. But the movie doesn’t enforce this insight. One is left to judge for oneself whether Father James is throwing his life away or losing it in order to find it.



To receive

I’d love to get a copy of a new biography, *Patrick Leigh Fermor: An Adventure*, by Artemis Cooper. Fermor, who died in 2011, is a figure sprung from a novel: he was a self-taught scholar (of art and architecture, languages, and religion), a raconteur, a soldier, and a secret agent. He was above all a writer—often called the best travel writer of the age.

The nation’s best writer on health care, Atul Gawande, has turned his attention to medical practice at the end of life in *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*. Gawande, a surgeon, has a gift for making his argument via narrative. In *Being Mortal* he exposes the ills of a health-care system that cuts geriatric services even though it is precisely the wisdom of geriatric doctors that can keep older people out of emergency rooms and nursing homes, cut unnecessary costs, and pro-



vide better quality of life for those in the last years of life.

Wendell Berry’s fiction is indispensable for anyone who preaches or thinks about community, forgiveness, and faithfulness. I’m grateful that at age 80, Berry continues to produce essays and stories. *A Place in Time: Twenty Stories of the Port William Membership* adds to his collection of tales about a fictional Kentucky town. Although Berry himself is often ambivalent about Christianity, his writing is suffused with Christian themes.



EDWARD J. BLUM

To give

Matthew Avery Sutton read just about everything that fundamentalists and evangelicals had to offer in preparation for his pointed argument in *American Apocalypse*: premillennial dispensationalism pushed conservative Protestants into public, political, national, and international action. If you want to wrestle with evangelicals, read this book.

You’ve probably heard “Girls Chase Boys” from the album *Lights Out*: it’s poppy and catchy. The song “Afterlife” has a similar feel but is much deeper. What you may not realize is that Ingrid Michaelson is one of the most thoughtful singer-songwriters out there. (Her song “Keep Breathing” is a family favorite.)



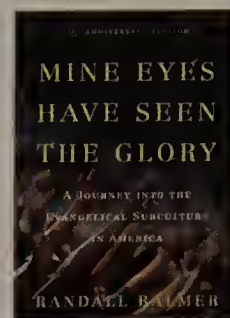
I’m not one to pretend that I don’t like Tom Cruise or his movies. I love them: from *Top Gun* to *Jack Reacher*, the man always keeps me entertained. In *Edge of Tomorrow*, we watch him die again and again. He does this beautifully.

To receive

I adored Brit Marling in *Another Earth*,

one of the finest redemption films ever made. Now she’s in a new film, *I Origins*, which emphasizes eyes and sight. I’m obsessed with how Americans try to see the unseeable in Jesus, so this is one I can’t miss.

I first read Randall Balmer’s *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* as an undergraduate almost 20 years ago. Now it’s been reissued in a 25th anniversary edition. The book explained the evangelicalism of my youth and pushed me beyond it. It is history, ethnography, and lived religion all in one.



It was only after three hours of viewing that my interest in *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* picked up. During the closing credits Ed Sheeran’s lyrical song “I See Fire” captivated me. If I have three hours to spare, I’d rather fill my ears with x, Sheeran’s new CD, than fill my eyes with a bunch of dwarves meandering around in a forest.



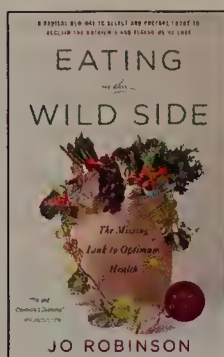
DEBRA BENDIS

To give

Whether read as a companion to formal studies of early Christianity or for pleasure, Peter Brown’s *Through the Eye of the Needle* is a valuable and rewarding investment (530 pages plus notes). I read it last year, then took a class on early Christianity. Now I look forward to rereading Brown because he adds context, covering economy, politics, religion, and more—all in one riveting narrative.

The news is not good: we’ve depleted the earth of many vegetables and fruits by breeding out nutrients and breeding in good looks and/or a longer shelf life. But Jo Robinson doesn’t leave us in despair. In *Eating on the Wild Side* she strikes a pleasurable balance between telling the

story of the artichoke, blueberry, or carrot, guiding the reader in what to plant or what to buy (try purple carrots), and how to prepare the produce (a dozen recipes are included).

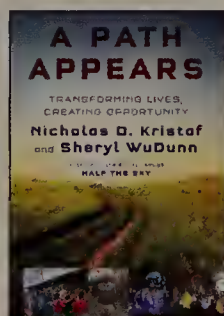


To receive

I became a devoted fan of Diane Ackerman after reading her account of rowing out among whales in Argentina (*The Moon by Whale Light*). I'm not sure any other writer is as knowledgeable, articulate, and passionate about nature, from bats to whales. Her new book, *The Human Age: The World Shaped by Us*, focuses on humans' relationship to creation.

I loved *Driftless* so much that I was actually disappointed to see that David Rhodes had published a sequel. How could *Jewelweed* ever measure up to *Driftless*? But in reading reviews and talking with a persuasive fan, I've decided to risk the read. Apparently the author has succeeded once again in writing about his neighbors in southwestern Wisconsin with an unflinching eye and deep affection.

Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn are fearless. They've been around the globe, tracking down the starkest, most hopeless topics—sex trafficking, female circumcision, malnutrition, and war crimes. In *A Path Appears: Transforming Lives, Creating Opportunity*, the *New York Times* columnist and his wife celebrate large and small solutions, many of them ingenious and life-changing.



Jean-François Parot has just published another book in a popular series about Police Commissioner Nicolas Le Floch (*La pyramide de glace*). The charming and loyal Le Floch has the confidence of the king and queen as well as responsibil-

ity for murder investigations in 18th-century Paris. Parot, a former diplomat, describes Paris as gritty, overcrowded, and rife with intrigue—perfect for murder mysteries. The plot occasionally slows as meals are described in detail, reminding the reader that the French gastronomic tradition is already taking shape. Although *Pyramide* is available only in French, other books in the series are available in English. Start with *The Châtelet Apprentice*.

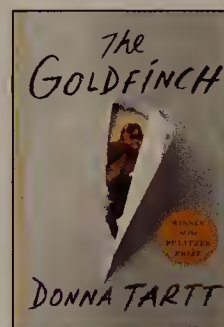


M. CRAIG BARNES

To give

Sue Monk Kidd's writing is as wonderful in *The Invention of Wings* as it was in the highly regarded *The Secret Life of Bees*, but this time she is using her literary skills to tell a story of freedom from slavery—freedom for both blacks and whites.

Donna Tartt's novel *The Goldfinch* depicts the desperate need for art among those who've lost their way in life. But the book is a brick. I slogged through it, so one of my friends should have to.



Daniel James Brown has written *The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*. I just gave copies of this extraordinary story to the vice presidents at our seminary. We'll use our Christmas retreat to discuss the book's insights about what it takes to weave individual stories into an effective team.

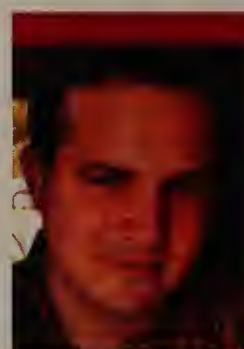
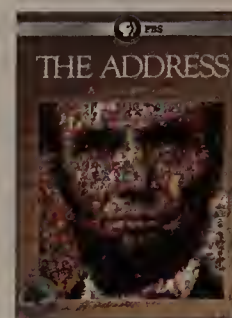
To receive

When I was a grad student in Chicago I got hooked on Magic Slim and the Teardrops. Some have suggested they were the last great blues band in town. They are now gone, but *Pure Magic* is a

new release of the music that we still need on a Friday evening after a hard week.

I am struck by our students' deep devotion to being good stewards of what remains of God's creation. We need serious theologians like David Fergusson and his book *Creation* to keep us centered in the Christian tradition as we fulfill this stewardship.

In the documentary *The Address*, by Ken Burns, a New England school helps its students overcome their learning disabilities by having them memorize the Gettysburg Address, and then present it before their teachers and parents. I watched this on PBS and was fascinated by its subtext—carefully written words still have the power to change lives.



STEVE THORNGATE

To give

In *On Immunity*, Eula Biss writes about our fear of immunization in the manner of early Annie Dillard: boldly, philosophically, with a startlingly ambitious scope that in lesser hands would fast go off the rails. Biss's prose exudes curiosity and wisdom, plus it's a delight to read. Top of my gift list for anyone who loves big ideas, great writing, and not having to choose between the two.

Recently there has been a welcome increase in TV shows that aren't groundbreaking, daring, or subversive, but just really good. *The Good Wife*, the saga of attorney Alicia Florrick (Season 5), is an old-fashioned network series that will be immediately familiar to anyone who's ever binged on courtroom procedurals or political dramas, but that also makes most of those other shows look pretty dumb.

Another day, another God-haunted Americana songwriter. Andrew Marlin may no longer claim a faith, but his tuneful songs retain a deeply Christian vocabulary. In *This Side of Jordan*, Marlin and Emily Frantz (Mandolin Orange) sing together with subtlety and warmth, and they play their acoustic instruments with understated competence. I've been listening to this quiet, simply produced record all year.



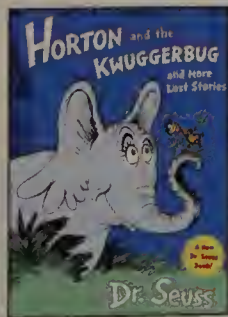
To receive

Some entries in Bob Dylan's sprawling Bootleg Series are of interest only to the most obsessively completist fan. After all, his official studio albums generally sound better, and there are enough really good ones to keep most of us busy. But I'd like to spend a weekend listening to *The Basement Tapes Complete*, a comprehensive collection of Dylan's remarkable time in the Catskills with The Band.



I never knew that industrial musicals existed until I found Steve Young and Sport Murphy's *Everything's Coming Up Profits*. Apparently musical theater composers and performers used to do hack work for corporate events—private, highly specific little musicals meant to pump up the staff. In addition to the book there's a website with audio excerpts. The shows aren't half bad—not really surprising given the steady supply of talented musicians who need work.

What can I say: the year I became a dad, along came *Horton and the Kwuggerbug and More Lost Stories*, a new book by Dr. Seuss, despite his being dead for 23 years. Once I get a copy, it'll be the only thing I ever want to read to my daughter, poor kid.



JASON BYASSEE

To give

When James Martin pitched his book to Harper, he told them: "I want to write a commentary with my personal take on the Gospels after you send me to Israel. It'll be nearly 600 pages." I bought *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* in order to prepare for my own upcoming pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I intended to skip most of those pages but became engrossed. Martin reads scripture with joy, surprise, humility, and deep insight. The printing of the biblical passage after each meditation made me wonder if we preachers should read the scripture after talking about it.

S. C. Gwynne made professional historians crazy mad (or maybe just crazy jealous) with his book *Empire of the Summer Moon*. Now he's written *Rebel Yell: The Violence, Passion, and Redemption of Stonewall Jackson*. I live in a part of the country where the war isn't really over (a parishioner claims to have the rifle that fired the first shot in Stoneman's Raid at the end of the war). Our recent politics show that matters of violence, redemption, and what it means to be a white Southerner are as contentious as ever.



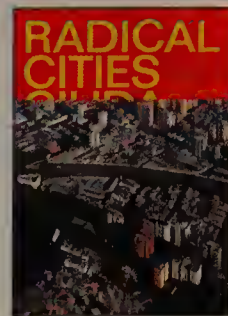
A friend in campus ministry describes Passenger's music as the best possible portrayal of life without the gospel. The music in the album *Whispers* is wise, angry, tender, and ferocious. Michael Rosenberg has a strange voice that won't leave your head, and does something really well that the church does really poorly: he laments. The single "Bullets" leaves me sympathetic to the sort of person I usually spend my time avoiding.

To receive

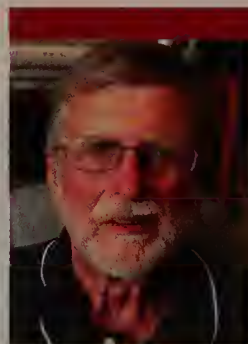
I keep hearing that *Her*, with Scarlett

Johansson's voice as an artificial intelligence operating system and Joaquin Phoenix falling for her, is difficult viewing but that the film won't leave you alone after you've seen it. Our lives are filtered through our devices and so dependent on them that this story strikes me as plausible.

In *Radical Cities: Across Latin America in Search of a New Architecture*, Justin McGuirk explores innovative urban architecture throughout Latin America, from an athletic facility that allows barrio kids to play soccer in the rainy season to a gun buy-back program in Bogotá that gives donors a spoon from the previous year's scrap, each with the inscription, "I was a gun."



Two things I can't get enough of: British humor and travel. They combine in *An Idiot Abroad*, when comedian/actor Ricky Gervais tells writer/actor Karl Pilkington what he should do while he's visiting the Seven Wonders of the World. I can't believe I'm suggesting a reality show, but the Brits do everything smarter and funnier, right?



RICHARD A. KAUFFMAN

To give

The most intriguing book I've read this year is *The Deepest Human Life: An Introduction to Philosophy for Everyone*. Scott Samuelson, who teaches philosophy, has the gift of treating difficult subjects in an accessible manner. From the existence of God to good and evil, he not only connects with his students but also weaves some of their stories into his expositions.

Because people of faith often claim more than they should about what they believe, Guy Collins suggests that a measure of theological modesty is in order. In *Faith-*

NOTES FROM THE GLOBAL CHURCH

“What happens when you look at Christianity outside its Euro-American framework?”

“That question becomes pressing when we look at numerical changes in the churches today—when, for instance, we realize that Africa will soon be home to the largest population of Christian believers on the planet.

“Although I describe my area of study as Global Christianity, that’s a flawed phrase: if it’s not global, is it really Christianity?”

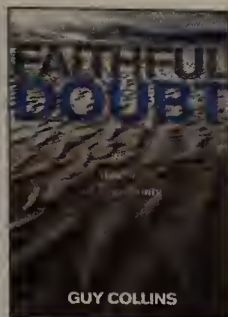


Philip Jenkins's *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* is a landmark book for understanding contemporary global history. *Publishers Weekly* called it “a clarion call for anyone interested in the future of Christianity.”

Philip Jenkins writes *Notes from the Global Church* for the *Christian Century*.

THE
Christian
CENTURY

ful Doubt: The Wisdom of Uncertainty, he argues that reasonable doubt is not a threat but a goad to better Christian theology. "Faith needs to have looked doubt in the eyes and seen its own reflection."



David Greene, co-host of NPR's *Morning Edition*, was formerly a bureau chief in Russia. His book *Midnight in Siberia: A Train Journey into the Heart of Russia* is based largely on his own experiences. He stitches into his narrative information about Russian history, culture, and its enigmatic people. Did you know, for instance, that the busiest McDonald's restaurant in the world is near Pushkin Square in Moscow?

To receive

The first two CDs in the series *Carols from the Old & New Worlds* are a treas-

ured part of my Christmas collection. In volume 3, Paul Hillier eschews the standard repertoire of Christmas music and seeks out older and lesser-known carols. "Framed by the seven 'O' antiphons for Advent," according to ArkivMusic's website, "this collection features carols from Ireland, the USA, Britain, and Alpine regions."



Christmas with the Shepherds is an album of Renaissance choral music by the Marian Consort. It includes a motet by Jean Mouton that was sung in the Sistine Chapel for 100 years after it was composed in 1515. The motet served as inspiration for other works on this CD: a mass by Cristóbal de Morales and a motet by Annibale Stabile.

Full of Cheer, by Home Free, I will put on my Christmas list as something lighter and peppier to listen to through the holi-

day season. Home Free, a male a cappella band, is part of a movement of men's groups that sing popular music in parts, largely without instruments.



CELESTE KENNEL-SHANK

To give

The Both, Aimee Mann and Ted Leo's first album together,

combines catchy tunes with lyrics about the complexity of human relationships. Topics include setting boundaries with people with addictions, conflict with loved ones, and coping with environmental destruction. But the songs aren't disheartening so much as cathartic.

Pilgrimage through Loss is part memoir about Linda Lawrence Hunt's grief for

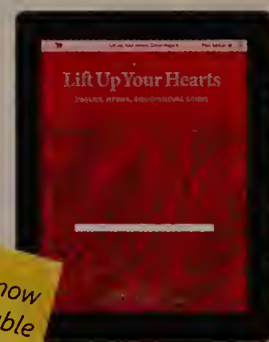
Introducing *Lift Up Your Hearts* App for iPad

What does the *Lift Up Your Hearts* (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013) iPad App contain?

- ▶ free download of all the Public Domain songs
- ▶ in-App purchase of copyrighted songs
- ▶ in-App purchases of the FlexScores for all songs

What other features does the iPad App have?

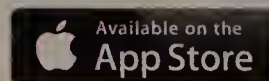
- ▶ allows you to create a setlist
 - tap one finger and flip to the next song
 - use a Bluetooth pedal and flip to the next song by a tap of the foot
- ▶ FlexScores include lead sheets, bulletin scores, large print version, and a variety of instrument scores (violin, viola, cello, bass, flute, oboe, bassoon, clarinet, alto sax, tenor sax, horn, trumpet, trombone, tuba)
- ▶ contains all prayers, litanies, and readings that are in the hymnal



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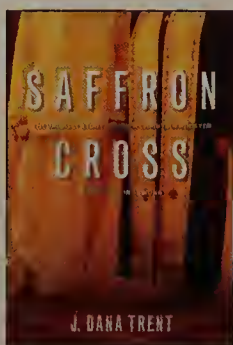
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her 25-year-old daughter and part guide for parents mourning the death of a child. Hunt makes it clear that there's no one path through grief. She provides the perspectives of other parents who've lost children and offers help for those who care for families through loss.

Much of the writing and research on interfaith marriages takes a tone of warning. In *Saffron Cross: The Unlikely Story of How a Christian Minister Married a Hindu Monk*, J. Dana Trent writes candidly about the challenges, joys, and lessons of being in such a union.

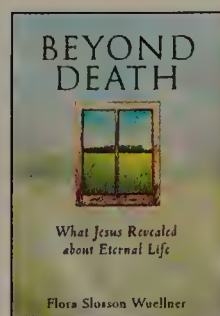


To receive

In *Pushin' Against a Stone*, Valerie June weaves strains of gospel, soul, and bluegrass. Growing up in the Church of Christ

denomination, where congregations don't use instruments or have choirs, June says that she learned to sing from "500 teachers three days a week for 18 years." The voice they trained is extraordinary.

In *Beyond Death: What Jesus Revealed about Eternal Life*, retired pastor and spiritual director Flora Slosson Wuellner writes with wisdom, honesty, and gentleness about issues encountered in pastoral care, both from the people we care for and from within ourselves. She guides those grappling with questions related to death and faith.



My husband loves to read new fiction, especially everything he's read by Japanese author Haruki Murakami. I expect that the author's newest book, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage: A Novel*, will be no exception.



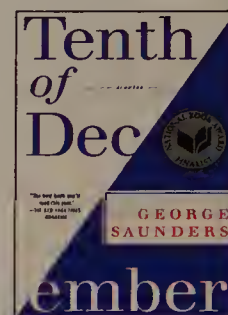
CAROL HOWARD MERRITT

To give

In *The Luminaries*, Eleanor Catton entwines rich characters

into the stunning landscape of historic New Zealand. Catton constructed a fascinating view of vocations, economy, and culture, while employing a unique structure that waxes and wanes with the moon.

I have never related to despicable people more than when I read George Saunders's latest collection of short stories, *Tenth of December*. Saunders sets up traps by building sur-



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Barbara Brown Taylor Photo Credit: Kenny Simmons

Another GladdeningLight

real and terrible situations and then, through humor and compassion, developing an awkward alliance between the reader and the perpetrators. Through it all we begin to question social injustices all around us and see our part in them.

Like Margaret Atwood, David Eggers has the ability to take our current technological trajectories and follow them to their extreme ends. *The Circle* is such a warning, a not-so-far-off glimpse into an unchecked future.

To receive

As a writer, I'm itching to read what others have to say on the subject. Marcus Borg has had a profound effect on my thinking, and I expect that his new book, *Speaking Christian*, will have the same sort of impact on my words.

On several occasions I picked up Anthony Doerr's book *All the Light We Cannot See* but didn't buy it. Now that I've finished Barbara Brown Taylor's *Walking in the Dark*, I wonder if there's any resonance between the two books. For that reason, *Light* has moved to the top of my wish list.

I devour books by comedians. Tina Fey, Amy Sedaris, Mindy Kaling, and Samantha Bee made me long for some words from Amy Poehler. Now she has written *Yes Please*, and I cannot wait to read it.



DREW G. I. HART

To give

I've always been particularly interested in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's time in

Harlem. Bonhoeffer attended the Abyssinian Baptist Church, where he was deeply influenced by black Christian faith. In *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*, Reggie Williams digs

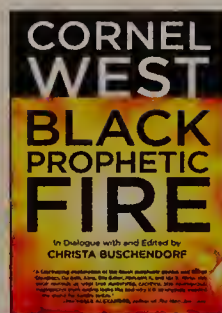
into Bonhoeffer's experience with the black church—a formative experience that helped prepare him to resist the Nazi regime.

Fruitvale Station was the most moving film I saw last year (directed by Ryan Cooglar). Given the growing frustrations in Ferguson and elsewhere, it should be required viewing. It's a beautiful and artful drama based on the real-life story of Oscar Grant, a young man who was shot in the back by police while handcuffed and lying on his stomach.

For something a little lighter, I recommend *Guardians of the Galaxy*, recently released as a DVD. This action-hero film is funny, quirky, and at times even sentimental. It has a different feel than some of the other superhero films out there, and it's thoroughly enjoyable.

To receive

Cornel West is one of the most important social prophets of our time. His book *Black Prophetic Fire* lifts up several black men and women who have embodied the prophetic tradition, a tradition West hopes will get passed on to the next generation. I want to read and be challenged by his insight, courage, and hope—by his own prophetic fire.



I was shocked when I saw that *Anomaly*, Lecrae's recent album, was topping the hip hop charts, given that he has usually stayed off the mainstream radar and been segregated into the world of Christian hip hop. I hear, however, that this album is less preachy and more socially conscious. That's enough to make me curious.

My last choice is *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, edited by Katie Cannon and Anthony Pinn. This tome has more than 500 pages of exploration, examination, and engagement with the field of African-American theology over the years—and also considers where this theology needs to go in the future. The price tag is hefty, so unless it's given to me, I won't be using this resource.



BETH FELKER JONES

To give

Lev Grossman has written *The Magician's Land*, the conclusion to his *Magicians* trilogy. Grossman's take on fantasy and schools of magic is dark, smart, and atheistic in a heartbreaking way. Give the trilogy to someone who wants to hope but has lost that Narnia magic.

In *Conversion*, Katherine Howe has rewritten *The Crucible* for young adult readers, and the book has crossover appeal for adult readers. It's about persuasion and pressure and mean girls, and it's a fast, fun read.

Christina Bieber Lake masterfully integrates fiction and theology in *Prophets of the Posthuman: American Fiction, Biotechnology, and the Ethics of Personhood*. She asks pressing questions about what it means to be human in an ever braver, newer world. The book won the Aldersgate Prize and should please lovers of fiction and theology alike.

To receive

In their first album, *Big Stories for Little Ones*, Rain for Roots told about God's love for little ones in lovely folk-style songs. I look forward to listening to their new offering, *The Kingdom of Heaven Is Like This*.



Claudia Rankine has written *Citizen: An American Lyric*, which promises poetic insight into racial aggression. She looks at ongoing effects of racism as seen in 21st-century situations. I look forward to reading this prize-winning book.

I'm always interested in ideas for integrating liturgical life and family life. *Let Us Keep the Feast: Living the Church Year at Home*, edited by Jessica Snell, comes recommended by people I trust.

A poor nation opens its doors

Refuge in Uganda

by David A. Hoekema

LAST SUMMER, while the attention of the world was focused on the World Cup in Brazil—the two weeks of the year when even Americans get excited about soccer—another competition was being organized in northern Uganda. According to a news release from the relief organization World Vision, Sudanese men living in refugee settlements organized a series of friendly “football for peace” matches. Each team included men from different ethnic groups—groups whose differences have sparked deadly clashes in their home countries.

Even though there were fewer soccer balls than teams, and even fewer uniforms to help players recognize their teammates, these matches helped overcome some divisions, World Vision reported. Watching their sons competing for goals motivated the elders to work more closely together across ethnic lines.

The East African nation of Uganda is not wealthy by any measure. United Nations figures for 2011 show per capita income of less than \$2 per day. Life expectancy at birth is about 54 years; infant mortality rates stand at 72 per thousand live births. Per capita income in the United States is nearly 100 times higher; life expectancy is 35 years longer; and infant mortality is less than one-tenth as high. With so little in its own pantry, one would hardly expect Uganda to be a major contributor to its neighbors’ welfare.

Yet Uganda is host to 220,520 refugees, according to 2014 figures compiled by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. In the United States, there are 263,662. Every day we hear American politicians and pundits complain about the heavy burdens placed upon the people of the United States by refugees, and yet we assist just one refugee in this country for every 1,200 residents. In Uganda, the comparable figure is one per 160 residents.

The burden of care for refugees, in other words, is 7.5 times higher, in refugees per thousand residents, in Uganda than in the United States. Yet not once in several visits to that country have I heard a Ugandan politician, pastor, or community leader complain about the social or financial costs of their reception and resettlement. Foreign governments and NGOs fund many of the services provided, to be sure, but local residents also do their part.

Northern Uganda is free from armed conflict today, but just across its borders civil wars rage in two countries. On a study tour of Uganda earlier this year, some Calvin College students and I visited a transfer camp for several hundred Congolese

who have fled the simmering conflicts in their home country, just a few kilometers to the west. Other nearby camps, including the one where the football tournament was organized, serve a flood of new arrivals from South Sudan, 15 kilometers to the north.

Our visit was arranged by staff members of World Renew (formerly Christian Reformed World Relief Committee), and in the camp we worked alongside others from Compassion International and the Lutheran World Federation. Some of the American students checked names from the eligibility list maintained by the regional UNHCR office. Others helped distribute clothing from assorted piles of overseas donations, according to family circumstances.

On a per capita basis, Uganda cares for far more refugees than the U.S. does.

Those who were not needed for these tasks taught singing games to Congolese children and learned their games in turn. The Hokey Pokey bridged the language and culture gap, drawing gales of laughter from the children and their watching parents.

On the day before our visit we met with the Ugandan prime minister’s representative for refugee affairs in the region. John Arinaitwe is a man of limitless energy, little patience, and passionate dedication to his work. “We have an obligation under the 1961 UN Convention on Refugees, and also under the African Union charter, to assist anyone who comes to our country fleeing political violence,” he told us. Accordingly, no one whose refugee status has been verified is turned away.

Refugees, he added, are by definition fleeing from violence and persecution in their home country on the basis of religion, ethnicity, or political affiliation. Ugandan immigration officials require evidence of such treatment before they grant refugee status, except when that status has been extended to entire ethnic groups by action of the Ugandan government. Economic

David A. Hoekema teaches philosophy at Calvin College.



INCOMING REFUGEES: John Arinaitwe (left), representative for refugee affairs, says that Uganda accepts any newcomer with a verified refugee status. Congolese children (right) play at Uganda's Waju refugee transfer camp while the adults build houses out of handmade bricks and thatch.

migrants are not eligible for resettlement and are sent back to their home countries.

"Who should bear the responsibility for caring for refugees," asked Arinaitwe, "in a country where we cannot afford to meet the basic needs of our own people?" The answer lies in collaboration between local, national, and international partners. Basic services for refugees are provided by NGOs and UNHCR. The World Food Programme, a United Nations agency based in Rome and funded by voluntary donations from governments and individuals, provides three months of basic food assistance to new arrivals. The Ugandan government, churches, and local landowners provide land to create resettlement camps. Churches in the area, particularly the Church of Uganda and the Catholic Church, provide opportunities for education and training, and they assist families who eventually move from resettlement villages to the towns and villages of the region.

"The refugee presence in northern Uganda is not new," Arinaitwe added, "although the numbers have increased very rapidly. There are children in resettlement villages who have never seen the place that their parents call home."

Your New Year's Resolution:

BE HOLY

We want to know who we are, where we belong, and why we are here. God calls us to be holy—to live more compelling, meaningful lives—but we don't know how to respond. Brian Christopher Coulter's answer is simple—and life-changing.

"In a society of thin technological living, the summons to 'holiness' is of immense importance. Coulter provides a helpful perspective."

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Newcomers are housed initially in huge UN tents in a transfer camp, collecting food each day from USAID trucks. But this is not a suitable long-term arrangement, he emphasized. As soon as possible, usually within a few weeks, each family is moved to a plot in a resettlement village, where they can build a home and plant crops.

Until violence subsides back home and it is safe to return, the Congolese immigrants will live and provide for themselves in Uganda. It may be a long wait. There is effectively no central government in eastern Congo today, only a patchwork of territories controlled by warlords and private armies. Deep in the bush are a few hundred loyalists still in hiding with Joseph Kony, founder of the Lord's Resistance Army.

The area west of the Nile River was never under LRA control, but for nearly a quarter century Kony's reign of terror in the Acholi and Longi districts to the east cut off supply routes and left the entire area isolated and impoverished. Today travel is safe, and there is no armed conflict inside Ugandan borders.

Poverty and social dislocation persist. Yet local authorities in the villages and towns of the region have joined in the effort to accommodate those fleeing from conflict elsewhere. At the district offices situated on a hill in the small and dusty town of Koboko, we looked to the west over forests that span the nearby Congo border. Koboko has long served as a market town for Congolese, Sudanese, and Ugandans alike, district adminis-

trators told us, but only in recent years have so many sought refuge from violence at home.

"The number of patients treated at our regional hospital has more than doubled with the arrival of refugees," said the district health officer, Dr. Norbert Kaggwa. And there are cultural and sanitary challenges as well, added Peter Abeson, district health and education officer: "Many of the people fleeing from conflict in rural areas prefer the bush to the toilet." Because basic med-

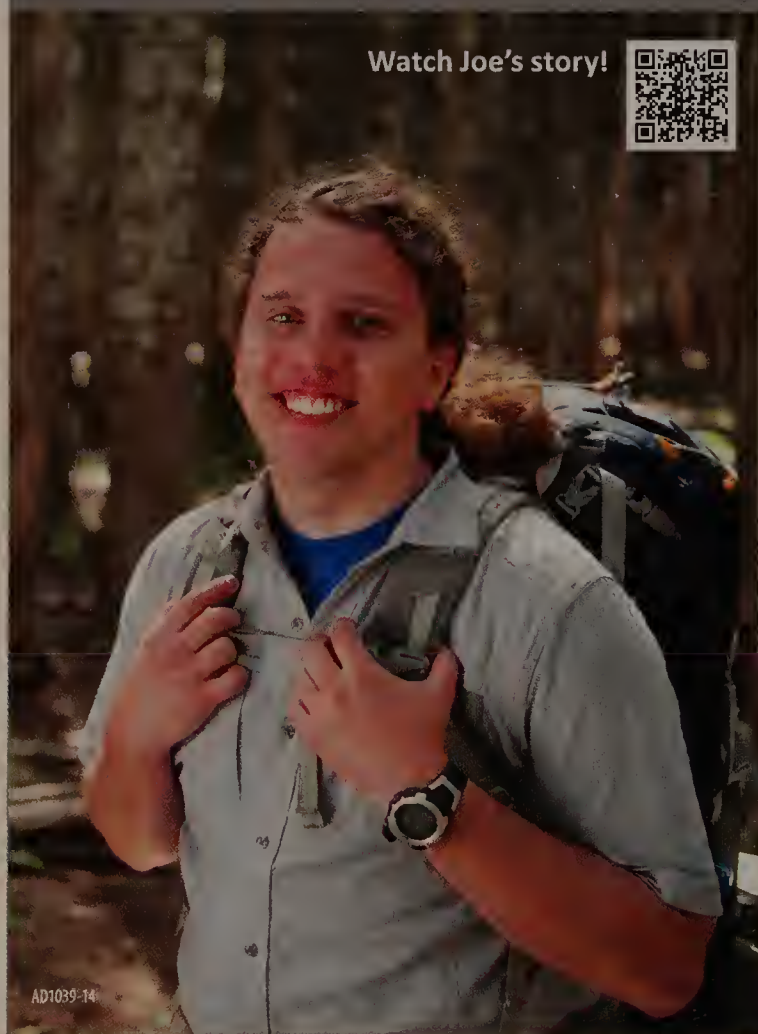
Uganda gives evidence that dire poverty and great generosity can coincide.

ical care and childhood vaccinations are unavailable in their home villages, a number of diseases now rare in Uganda, such as hepatitis B and guinea worm, afflict the refugee communities. The government has made it a priority to provide vaccinations and immunizations immediately to new arrivals.

After families are moved from transfer camp to resettlement village, we learned on our visit to Waju a few miles to the north, basic food assistance continues until crops can be harvested. White plastic tents stamped with the UNHCR symbol—one per family, not one per hundred people as at the transfer site—pro-

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vide temporary shelter. Walking through the village with children as guides, the students and I met family members who were building new homes from mud bricks that they had molded from the bed of a nearby stream, then roofing them with thatch they had harvested from nearby fields. Under the relentless tropical sun, “sweat equity” in new homes has a very literal meaning.

But these temporary provisions are not satisfactory as permanent homes. Arinaitwe told us he believes there are just three durable solutions to the plight of refugees, in Uganda and elsewhere. The first is repatriation, when the circumstances from which refugees were fleeing have been resolved and it is safe to return. That is the best long-term solution, he said, but sometimes it backfires. During the 1990s many Sudanese refugees to Uganda and Kenya were repatriated, only to be caught up in renewed ethnic violence following South Sudanese independence in 2006.

The second solution is full integration into the host community. This is a distant and difficult goal. Language poses an initial barrier: many of the Congolese refugees speak only Kakwa, those who have attended school speak limited French, and very few have learned any English. Placing refugee children in primary and secondary schools is critical, but it increases the demands on already overburdened and underpaid teachers.

A third long-term solution—the refugees’ first preference, in many cases, but seldom available—is resettlement in a third country. East Africans are aware of the massive resettlement of Somali refugees in the United States, for instance. According to the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, more than 55,000 Somalis came to the United States in the two decades before 2004. The numbers of refugees accepted today by the United States are declining, however, and administrative delays in handling emigration requests last for years. Arinaitwe told me he had just learned that some of the Rwandans in temporary settlements in southwest Uganda had been accepted by the United States—just eight of them.

In the Waju transfer camp, many called to us, in broken English or broken French, “Take me to America! I love America!” But very few of the men and women we met will find the path to resettlement abroad open to them. Most will spend years living in the mud brick houses they have built and farming a small plot to feed their families until they can return home safely. Others will seek out English lessons, learn to do paid work, and settle in one of the towns of northern Uganda.

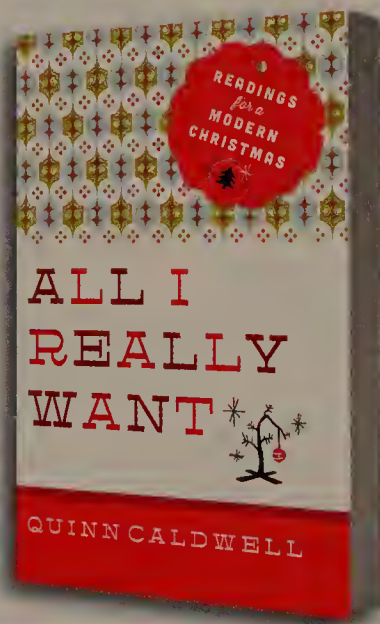
One of the most respected figures in the camp was a Presbyterian pastor whose ministry spans the Uganda-Congo

border, David Legai. He explained in French that he encourages camp residents to send their children to school, even though they will have a difficult time until they master English. In the meantime they can converse with their fellow students in Kakwa, the local language on both sides of the border.

When Uganda is in the news in the West, it usually appears in a very bad light. The stories are about the LRA rebellion; few know that the Protestant pastors, Catholic priests, and Muslim leaders of the Acholi region came together during the worst years of that conflict to form the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative, which was able to initiate talks with both rebel and government forces and played a decisive role in the LRA withdrawal from Uganda in 2006. Everyone has read about the Anti-Homosexuality Act which was debated for five years and enacted earlier this year. Far fewer know that the Ugandan Constitutional Court struck it down or that some courageous pastors and church members in East Africa are stalwart advocates of greater inclusiveness despite the opposition of church and political authorities.

The remarkable generosity of the people of northwestern Uganda, which my students observed in the words and deeds of church and government workers in support of refugees, give evidence that dire poverty and great generosity sometimes coincide. If we want to know what it means to live faithfully under the most difficult circumstances, and if we seek examples of those who have very little sharing with others who have even less, northern Uganda today deserves a close look. **CC**

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Right-brained apologetics

FRANCIS SPUFFORD has won several literary awards in Great Britain for his nonfiction works, which include *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* and a memoir of childhood, *The Child That Books Built*. In 2012 he published what he calls “a short polemic about religion”: *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*. One British reviewer described his case for faith as “rude, intelligent, and convincing.” The American paperback edition of *Unapologetic* was published this month by HarperOne.

Your book is not “apologetic” in the classic sense of presenting a rational defense of Christian belief designed to persuade skeptics. You explicitly focus on the emotional sense of Christianity. Do you think there is a place for the former kind of apologetics?

I’m not always intellectually convinced by particular moves that particular apologists make as they go about the traditional business of defending the integrity and plausibility of

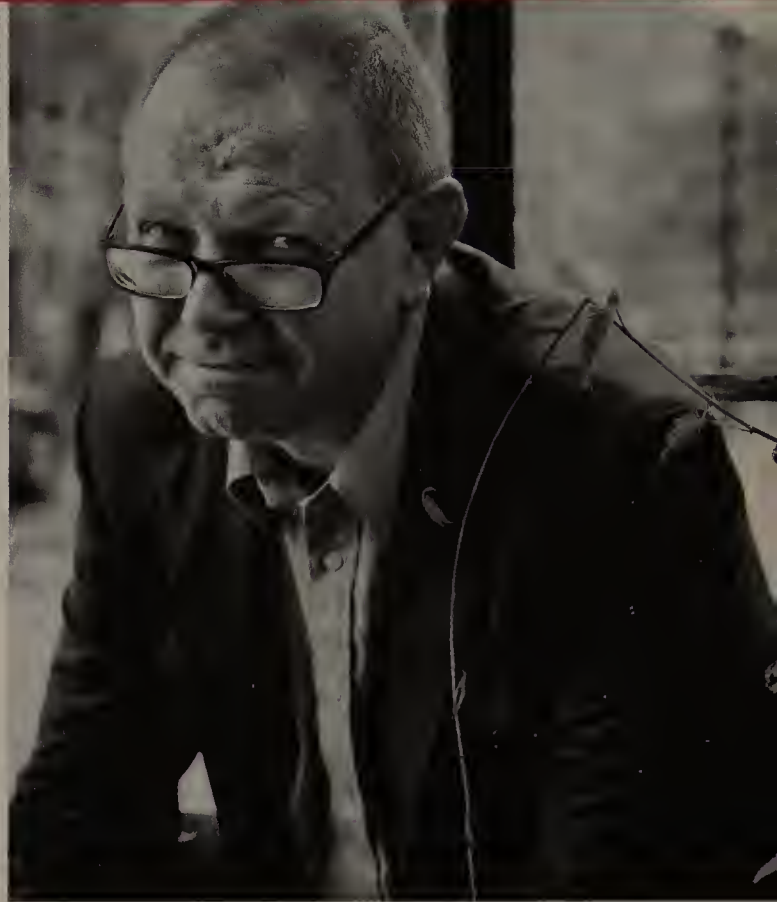
“Emotions create a setting in which ideas begin to matter as more than abstraction.”

Christian ideas, but I absolutely accept the value of the task. It needs to exist in the Christian intellectual ecosystem and to be reinvented for changing contexts of ideas every generation, maybe every decade. I just don’t think it is the only persuasive tool we need, or that it is always the right one to reach people with.

Often, even when writers think they are beginning from scratch, conventional apologetics assumes a kind of basic assent from the reader to the idea that this religion stuff matters at all—that God is important enough that you’d want to devote your time to propositions about him. And for increasingly large numbers of people, that just isn’t true any more.

Especially in my own European context, but I think in swaths of secularized America too, there’d need to be a reason before the reasons began for why you’d engage with an argument about God at all. This, I think, is where it makes sense to

PHOTO BY BART KOETSIER



speak in the language of experience, of emotion, which is humanly recognizable as being urgent without the need for prior assent.

My book isn’t intended to compete with more conventional apologetics, and it certainly isn’t supposed to be saying: emotions good, ideas bad. We need both. But emotions create the setting in which the ideas begin to matter as something more than dry abstractions.

There’s a particular danger, just at the moment, of falling in with the atheist polemicists’ endless, tedious, monopolistic concentration on whether God exists. OK, God’s existence is logically prior to the possibility of our faith in him, but it isn’t biographically prior, it doesn’t come first in terms of the life of faith. God’s love gets us there, God’s mercy. His mere existence is probably God’s most boring quality.

It is sometimes said that the sequence of faith and churchgoing in our time is not “believe, then belong” but “belong, then believe.” Does that sound right?

It doesn’t sound quite right to me. In some ways, being a member of a church community for whatever reason clearly enrolls you in a kind of very valuable school for the heart, where the practice, the doing part of the shared Christian life, can build up over time into a powerful, wordless understanding. But if we say that in the contemporary world people primarily believe because they belong, and that our evangelical attention should therefore go on making them belong, or helping them belong, then we seem to me to be piling far too many of our eggs in the one basket of church’s social legitimacy.

In the United States, church is still one of the standard forms of bottom-up civil association. It’s one of the basic voluntary building blocks of society. You arrive in a new city or a new neighborhood, and you naturally look for a sympathetic

congregation, as a way of attaching yourself, of becoming at home in a new place.

As someone who lives in a place—England—where this has not been true for at least two generations, I look at the American pattern with some envy, yet I also think that it would be a mistake to count on the desire to belong as a permanent force working in church's favor. It can't be sufficient for faith to just accrete as a consequence of a fundamentally secular need.

There are open doors to God everywhere, and none of them should be scorned, but belonging to God's family is different from other kinds of belonging. I would want to say that church is the community formed by belief, rather than that Christianity is the belief formed by community.

Is there a kind of evangelical clarity or advantage in the British situation in that the faith question is sharply posed without cultural baggage? If so, the problem of entrée remains: How does the church as an institution begin to draw people into matters of faith?

Well, maybe. It's certainly easier in the British setting, I think, to distinguish between the appeal of Christianity as such and the appeal of belonging to a community's consensus about what virtue is.

In Britain, the commonsensical understanding of what it means to be a decent person has parted company with Christianity to the extent that you're doing something counterintuitive and perhaps potentially even isolating if you go looking for goodness in church. (Thankfully, some stubborn souls do it anyway.)

We don't have a problem with moralistic and therapeutic deism in Christian disguise, because with us there's no need for moralism or therapy to put on religious clothes. The true oddity of Christian belief stands revealed.

But that leaves us with exactly the problem of entrée, and pointing to any kind of supposed purity in the British position would be like suggesting that starvation has weight-loss advantages. Better, much better, to have all the inevitable compromises of being woven into social belonging, because that offers so many more entrées to faith—so many doors through which people may discover the Christ who offers more than belonging.

You lived part of your life apart from church. Can you say anything about what made you return or what in your own early experience of church made the most impact? Looking back, what was most formative—positively and negatively—in your early experience of church?

I came back because I made a mess of my life in one of the characteristic ways that men in their thirties do, and I found myself in need of forgiveness. And to my astonishment, forgiveness seemed to be there, when I asked for it.

Then bit by bit, I discovered that this thing, church, which I had last really paid attention to when I was about 13, seemed

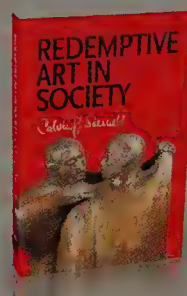
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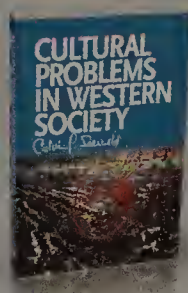
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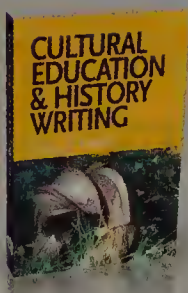
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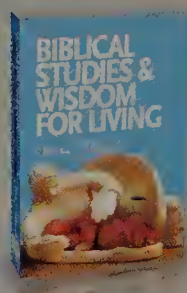
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to be far subtler and tougher and richer and larger than my child-sized understanding of it.

I should say that I sat for a long time in empty churches trying to quiet my mind and to listen to whatever might be there to be heard before I dared to go along to an actual service, with other human beings. (This probably affects my judgment on the believing/belonging question.)

Since then, with 15 years of membership behind me and a kind of minister's-side view of what works and doesn't for children, because I'm married to an Anglican parish priest, I suppose I look at my younger self and I notice that my

childhood congregation did successfully load me up with the first understanding from which an adult understanding could grow. It gave me a map, even if I couldn't read it yet—even if I then forgot I had it for 20 years. I knew where to go when I needed help. And that seems to be a lot, in an uncertain world, and I'm grateful for it. I try to pass along the favor.

One of your other books is about the impact of books and stories on you as a child. What part does this nurturing of the imagination play in religious life?

Huge. We live by stories. They constitute the world for us, in everyday ways, all the time, just as an ordinary cognitive consequence of being human. We walk on narrative ground, under a sky of pelting anecdotes.

And for Christians, the particular story of the gospel is central, giving us reality's underlying shape far more profoundly, I think, than any theological argument. We have to tell it and keep telling it, but this doesn't mean we have to be nervous about all the other stories, or to treat our own as if it were terribly vulnerable and had to be kept pure. We should trust its power and be enthusiastic about imagination as such, as the faculty that feels its way ahead of us, reaching for what we cannot yet know face to face—that looks as hard as it can into many glasses, darkly. The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen? Sounds like a job for imagination.

Anyone writing a popular book on Christianity may be shadowed by the figure of C. S. Lewis. Has he been important to you?

The Narnia books were my favorite reading as a child, and now, as a rather eccentric or peculiar kind of apologist, I have to reckon with Lewis as the biggest and most influential of my predecessors, someone whom I must define myself in relation to.

It isn't always the most straightforward and comfortable of relationships for me, because I'm out of sympathy with him theologically in a number of ways, and I'm also very conscious that in my own British setting his apologetics have lost their reach. For reasons to do with his voice on the page, and with the two generations of distance from which most Brits now view faith, he no longer speaks successfully to the uncommitted.

So I don't want to do some of what he does, and a lot of what we agree on I think now has to be done differently to stand a chance of being heard. But I admire him deeply. If I could achieve anything like his

Craig Harline

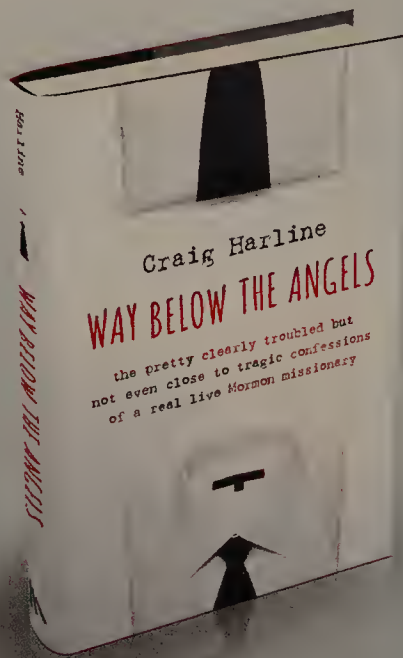
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power to articulate transcendence, or his sardonic realism about human character, I would be very, very happy.

What do you find unsympathetic in Lewis? And what do you think makes contemporary readers less likely to be receptive?

It's the way he makes Christianity so primarily a deal about immortality. I'm not a Platonist, and I don't yearn to get outside the world of matter. Redemption, for me, needs to start making sense right here, incarnationally, before I start entertaining hopes of eternity.

"For me, redemption needs to start making sense right here, incarnationally."

As a child, I was troubled by the relish with which Lewis seemed to destroy Narnia in *The Last Battle*; as an adult, trying to do apologetics in his shadow, I think suggesting that faith entails a head-on collision with biology as its first order of business is a bad idea.

But there's also now a problem of voice for his apologetics which is specific to Britain. In the United States he just sounds,

well, British on the page—safely outside American social judgments. But at home, quite unfairly, he has started to sound posh and a bit authoritarian. History is to blame, not him.

Early 21st-century British readers, on the other side of an enormous casualization of manners, aren't very good at picking up on how carefully he is doing the off-the-cuff, down-at-the-pub, off-duty version of his erudite Oxford don's voice. The static of time is interfering with our reception of him.

The context of your book is very much British culture. Have you thought about how it might have been shaped differently in an American context?

I know my limitations here. It seems to me that there is quite a large world of, as it were, Europe-in-America in the United States today—secularized regions of the culture where my sense that you have to explain everything may come in handy. And I hope, too, that a lot of what I am trying to convey in *Unapologetic* is universal because it is basic, because it is what belongs in common to all of Christianity's varieties.

But if you're going to try to speak directly out of experience, you have to speak out of a real and therefore particular experience, in a particular voice. And my voice is hopelessly British. I hope it travels; I want it to, as much as possible. But I fear that from the American point of view I'm probably stuck with producing the *Masterpiece Theater* of the soul. **CC**

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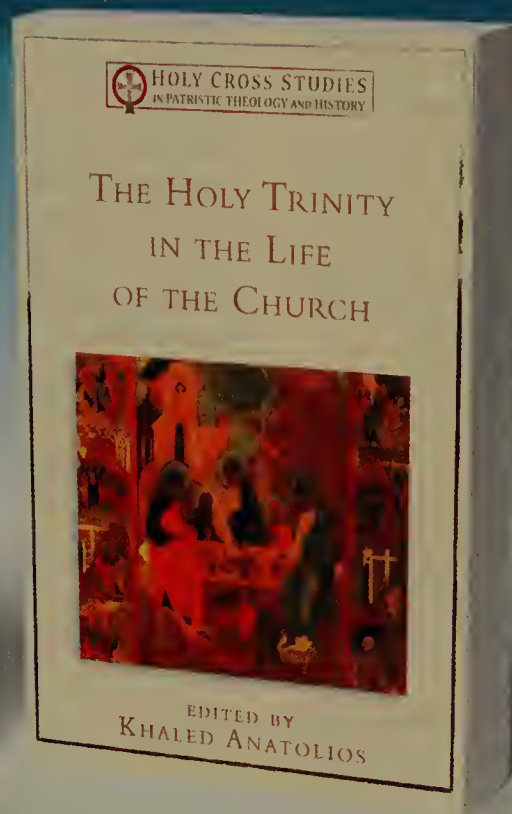
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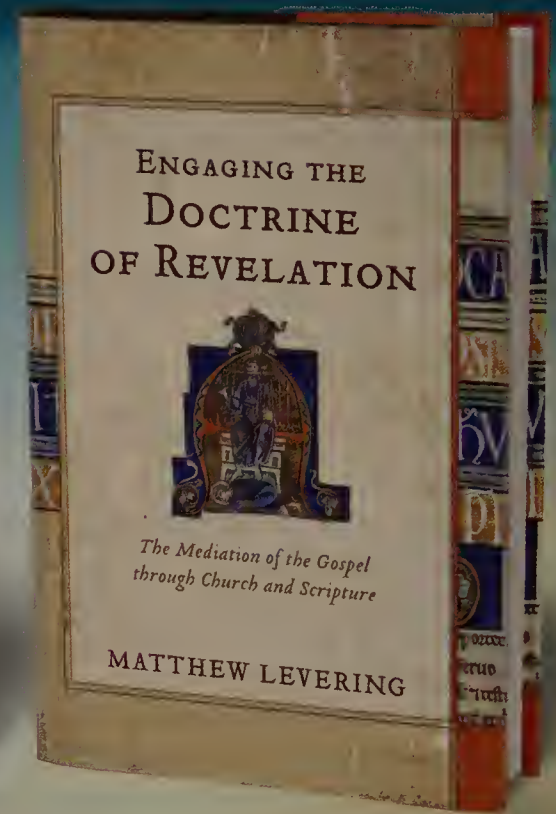
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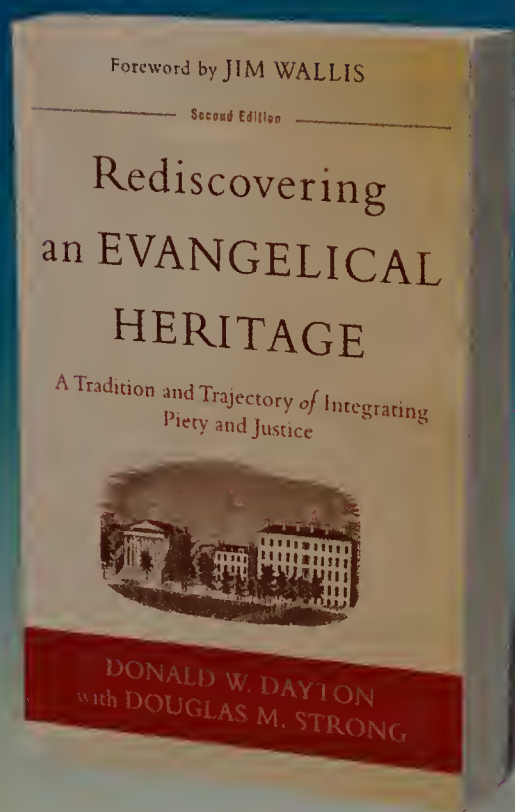
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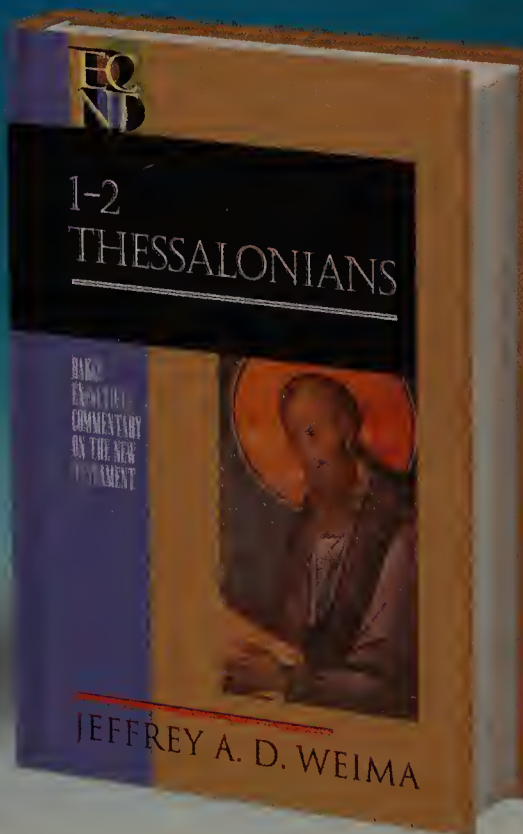
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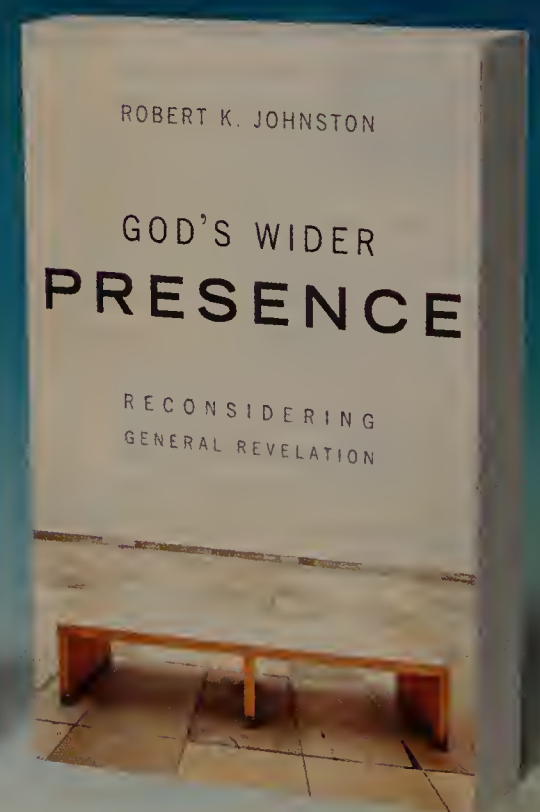
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Faith MATTERS

by Carol Zaleski

Pickles: A history

I'VE LONG HAD it in mind to write a book with the title *Pickles: A History*. My husband thinks it's a crazy idea, but there is precedent in the recent spate of social microhistories—big books about small things—which has given us books like *Salt: A World History*, *The Pencil: A History of Design and Circumstance*, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger*, and *Consider the Fork*. Whimsical though it may seem, the impulse to tell the story of a civilization through a single object—a spice, a silk-worm, a microbe, a pruning hook—can be a serious one. One can see the universe in a grain of salt.

G. K. Chesterton had a gift for microhistory: "Once I planned to write a book of poems entirely about the things in my pockets," he tells us, "but I found it would be too long; and the age of the great epics is past." In lieu of the epic poem the subject deserved, he contributed an essay to the *Daily News* on "What I Found in My Pocket." And what he found in his pocket was a pocketknife, "one of the most primary of those practical origins upon which . . . all our human civilisation reposes"; a box of matches embodying "fire . . . the thing we all love, but dare not touch"; and a piece of chalk, in which he saw "all the art and all the frescoes of the world." For Chesterton, the microhistory was a way to give thanks for existence itself.

But why pickles? It's partly personal. I grew up on the border of the Lower East Side in the decades before its gentrification. New York was a little world for me then, a walkable microcosmos, from my neighborhood where everyone was Jewish though no one went to synagogue, to the multiethnic immigrant streets where Jewishness confronted me in forms at once exotic and connatural; and where the only Christians I was conscious of meeting were Catholic Workers at Dorothy Day's St. Joseph House (they seemed pretty Jewish, too). My favorite walk took me to the Roumanian Pickle Works on Orchard Street. Uptown there were steaming chestnuts from street vendors at Christmas time; in my neighborhood there were candy buttons that stuck to the paper; but on the Lower East Side it was pickles all the way. Proust had his madeleines; I knew neither madeleines nor the Magdalen they bring to mind, but I had pickles, drawn from the depths of the giant barrels that crowded the sidewalk. No memory can compete for poignancy with one that has fermented in a great oak barrel.

As I get older, this pickle memory is likely to intensify. When we're young, the field of experiences seems wide open; but one day the thought strikes us that our stock of experi-

ences is not infinite. It's not a painful realization, this narrowing of temporal horizons, but it gives the present moment a sharper, more saturated flavor, as if it had been steeping for a long time in all that has gone past.

Pickles, it seems to me, convey this saturated quality of experience with a peculiar vividness and universality. As the most ancient means of preserving fresh produce during cold and lean times, pickles are as fundamental to civilization as any of the contents of Chesterton's pockets. Pickles are an emblem of survival, homespun craft, and household thrift (and how I would like to be that kind of resourceful mother who can keep her family healthy on an astringent budget!). Pickles speak, they smell, of Tradition with a capital T. Whether naturally fermented or assisted by vinegar and spices, pickles are conveyors of a culture nurtured and passed down from generation to generation.

And the culture of pickles can be subtle, complex, finely differentiated. Like many fermented foods they are rich in the "fifth flavor" for which the Japanese term *umami* has been coined. The *tsukemono* that accompany traditional Japanese meals—fermented, dried, sometimes brilliantly colored slivers and shapes of ginger, radish, plum, cucumber, eggplant, cabbage—are as redolent of the studied naturalness of Japanese aesthetics as sauerkraut is of German heartiness. Every nation and culture from ancient Sumer to modern Korea has its characteristic art of pickling; and every civilization has developed, as essential to its advancement, a corresponding science. We may look for the origins of chemistry in the pickle jar rather than the alchemist's alembic.

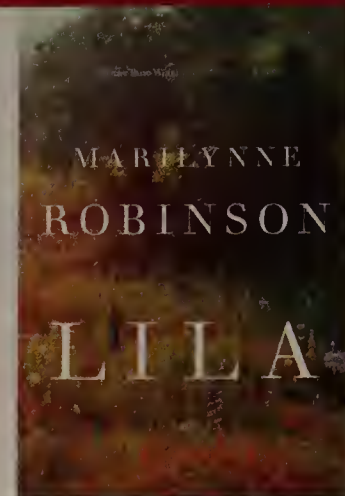
But this does not exhaust the fascination of the pickle; for what the pickle really stands for is the mystery of taste itself. In the taxonomy of the spiritual senses, taste is, with seeing, the sense that partakes of intimate and unmediated knowledge of the beloved. To hear and obey is very good; to taste and see is far better. Perhaps this is what the pungent, the poignant, the unclassifiable tastes are trying to tell us: that our past and present, our traditions and cultures, the pristine sensations of childhood, the memories leached by age, will be preserved for us in the divine presence. Perhaps they are hints that, in the promised resurrection, there will be tasting (didn't the risen Jesus taste that broiled fish?) as well as touching, seeing as well as hearing, remembering without forgetting, world without end.

Carol Zaleski is a professor of world religions at Smith College.

IN Review

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by Amy Frykholm



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By Marilynne Robinson

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 272 pp., \$26.00

Marilynne Robinson's readers already know the title character of her new novel, having met Lila twice: once as the mother of John Ames's son in *Gilead*, and once as a skeptical but sympathetic presence in *Home*, the story of *Gilead*'s Boughton family. And I felt that I had met Lila in Robinson's other work, perhaps in the characters of Sylvie and Ruth in *Housekeeping*, two women torn between homelessness and home, between something wild in themselves that resists domesticity and something that craves shelter. Early in *Lila*, the title character recalls John Ames telling her about a bird that had flown into his house during a storm. "It left a blessing in the house," he told her. "The wildness of it. Bringing the wind inside." Lila knows that this is Ames's way of acknowledging their relationship, the bit of "wind inside" that she is to him. It is also Ames's way of acknowledging that she might not stay with him. He has no right to keep her. She is free to go if she must.

Lila grapples with her desire for both freedom and shelter. Throughout the novel, she tells her own story to herself, from the moment that her surrogate mother, Doll, stole her off a porch, through the birth and baptism of her son. She tries to understand this story in light of her new circumstances, and she wonders what of it she will share with Ames.

At the beginning of the novel, she decides only to tell him sweet things about her past:

She would tell the old man, I didn't use to mind tansy. I still like an apricot now and then. She pretended that he knew some of her thoughts, only some

of them, the ones she would like to show him. Mellie with her babies. Doll smiling because she had a bit of sugar candy from the store to slip into Lila's hand when the others weren't looking. Any one of them could walk through the field, plucking at the blue stem and the clover, thinking their own thoughts, natural as could be.

But gradually Lila wonders how to address the darker parts of her past: the whorehouse, the wandering, the wrenching and unrelenting loneliness that Ames cannot relieve. "You don't know nothing about me," she blurts out. "I got feelings I don't have names for. There probly ain't any names."

"People do talk to me," Ames says in response, a little defensively maybe. "About all sorts of things. Sometimes it helps."

She also keeps her theological musings to herself. Particularly mysterious to her is baptism, which haunts the novel from beginning to end. On every page, the novel plays with this mystery. Water and washing, belonging and blessing. Doll washes the child Lila, and as she does so, she says, "Don't know what I think I'm doing." Ames's second baptism of Lila is accompanied by the same words, "I don't really know what I am doing here." When Lila washes in the river, she somehow belongs to the river. When she is washed by Ames, she belongs mysteriously to him or to what he represents. And yet she never belongs to either one of them—always her mind, like the bird in the house, retains a wildness of its own.

Whatever baptism means, it does not mean the certainty of outcomes, and she and Ames both feel this. "That was exis-

tence, and why didn't it roar and wrench itself apart like the storm it must be? . . . Even now thinking of that man who called himself her husband, what if he turned away from her?" Each step in their relationship is fraught with risk, and the fragile ground under their feet erupts at nearly every moment. Ames is all but certain that Lila will leave him. Lila believes that she will finally tell Ames the very thing that will make him want her to go. And yet each gesture leads them a step closer to one another. Thinking that Ames will one day die, Lila starts to meet him at the church so they can walk home together in the evenings. Imagining that Lila will leave him, Ames learns that she is expecting a child. Prepared for that child to die, Lila and Ames lie together on his bed and become more intimate in their terrible vulnerability than either knew was possible.

Perhaps the novel stands or falls on how authentic the reader finds the love story that entwines these two unlikely lovers, who are separated by 30 years and entirely different backgrounds. Ames lives in the home in which he was born, which has housed so many people related to him that there is a ghost in every room. Lila can barely read or write and does not have enough words for her experiences. Ames has almost nothing but words. Books and ideas have been the essential food of his life.

Lila copies passages from her stolen Bible to teach herself how to write. "I

Amy Frykholm is a CENTURY associate editor.

had to learn the word ‘existence.’ You was talking about it all the time. It took me awhile to figure out what you even meant by it,” she tells Ames. Yet she has worlds of experience to offer him. Ames tells Lila, “I know you have things to tell me, maybe hundreds of things, that I would have never known. . . . Maybe you don’t realize how important this is to me, not to be—well, a fool, I suppose.” But she tells him very little. Nearly everything goes unsaid between the characters in this novel of theological contemplation, but almost nothing goes unthought or unfelt. Ames and Lila build their relationship on both longing for intimacy and respectful distance. Their path to love is the gradual removal of the internal barriers that keep them apart.

I couldn’t help but wonder why a novel that essentially consists of the thoughts of one character as she pieces together her identity from scraps of past and present isn’t boring. There are not many scenes that interrupt the flow of what one reviewer calls Lila’s “soul voice.” In perhaps the most crucial section of the novel, Lila spends the morning thinking. Ames comes home for lunch, and they talk. Ames leaves, and Lila continues thinking. And yet, the novel is not dull. Its exquisite language is working on so many levels at the same time that the reader has to give it equally exquisite attention or miss the most important moments of transformation. Its questions are both internal and eternal. “Pity us, yes, but we are brave, she thought, and wild, more life in us than we can bear, the fire infolding itself within us. . . . Someday she would tell him what she knew.”

Jesus against the Scribal Elite: The Origins of the Conflict

By Chris Keith

Baker Academic, 208 pp., \$22.99 paperback

Chris Keith sets out to answer two questions. Most basically: What lay at the heart of the conflict that led some religious authorities, the “scribal elite,” to seek and win Jesus’ death? In Keith’s estimation the explanation leads to a second matter: Was Jesus literate, and how did he relate to Israel’s scriptures? Keith maintains that Jesus did not possess anything like scribal literacy but that early Christian memory tended to enhance Jesus’ literacy as time progressed. Jesus’ status as an authoritative teacher, especially as an interpreter of scripture, lies at the heart of the conflict that led to his death. Other factors, such as the nature of Jesus’ teaching, his relationship to messianic expectation, and his reputation as a wonder worker, would have been secondary.

Keith writes with the charm of an excellent classroom teacher: always clear, occasionally hip, and sometimes a little geeky. Any reader who has completed a basic curriculum in the Gospels will enjoy this book, while professional scholars will recognize immediately that Keith is a primary contributor to aca-

Reviewed by Greg Carey, who teaches New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary and is a resident scholar at the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

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democratic debates. He has earned a reputation as an influential emerging voice in historical Jesus research and an expert on ancient literacy.

Keith's basic argument comes down to two elements. First, Jesus was not a scribal-literate teacher, but some of his contemporaries believed he was. Second, these split perceptions led to conflict between Jesus and the scribal elites. Jesus provided compelling interpretations of scripture, but the elites assumed that only highly literate persons were qualified to offer such teaching. When the scribal elites sought to expose Jesus as a pretender who lacked the credentials to read and interpret the Law, Jesus fought back and occasionally won the struggle for public esteem. The elites' attempts to embarrass Jesus amounted to an attempt "to put out a fire with gasoline."

Keith's argument is straightforward. He explains that public teachers were expected to possess scribal competence, a rare quality in the ancient world.

Contrary to widespread assumption, ordinary Jews did not acquire literacy through synagogue education. In a brilliant survey of the synoptic Gospels, Keith demonstrates a progression: where Mark presents an illiterate Jesus who does not succeed as a synagogue teacher, Matthew's Jesus knows the Torah intimately, and Luke's Jesus possesses scribal expertise. Keith argues that it is far more likely that Christians enhanced Jesus' education as time passed than that they diminished it. Early Christianity's ancient critics charged that the movement was composed of ignorant, low-status people, and the move toward a literate Jesus aimed to blunt that critique.

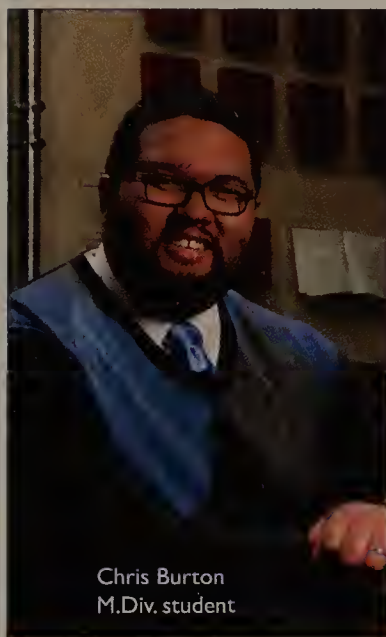
Then Keith gets to the heart of the matter. Jesus spoke in public, particularly interpreting scripture in synagogues and challenging the interpretations of his opponents. Therefore some observers naturally assumed he was literate. His conflict with various scribal groups tended to revolve around his authority to interpret scripture—particularly because

he lacked the ability to read the relevant texts.

This book includes several examples of remarkably insightful biblical interpretation, particularly when Keith examines the distinctive ways in which each Gospel treats Jesus' relationship to literacy. One outstandingly presented case involves Mark's "layered portrayal" of Jesus as a synagogue teacher in diverse contexts. Mark contrasts Jesus' teaching with those of the "scribal-elite teachers," combining Jesus' teaching with his powerful deeds: "Where an audience is willing to allow Jesus' exorcisms and healings to influence their view of his identity, he is accepted as a synagogue teacher," but where the audience does not link Jesus' deeds to his teachings, they reject him. Indeed, after the account of Jesus' difficult visit to the Nazareth synagogue, Mark never again describes Jesus teaching in a synagogue. Thus "Mark portrays Jesus as a compelling teacher whose contemporaries did not expect him to be a *synagogue* teacher because he was a member of the manual-labor class." Keith then goes on to show how Matthew and Luke subtly and not so subtly revised Mark's version of the story to enhance Jesus' teaching authority (Matthew) and his literacy (Luke).

No one in Jesus' world talked about a group of scribal elites as Keith does, and Keith doesn't discriminate among the elites and their potentially diverse relationships to Jesus. He is more interested in tracing the most fundamental motive for their resistance to him. But readers will wonder: How did Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, priests, and others relate to one another, and how did each group relate to Jesus? Did all these groups enjoy elite status?

The Gospel narratives provide two different impressions regarding the con-



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troversies between Jesus and other authorities. To a historian's eye it seems largely plausible that throughout his ministry in Galilee and elsewhere Jesus engaged in debates with the Pharisees and their allies. We could pour over details concerning the extent of the debates and the identity of the Herodians and the scribes, but there's no reason to doubt that Jesus received, responded to, and perhaps initiated criticism.

On the other hand, in Jerusalem Jesus debated a wide variety of opponents. This impression clearly reflects Mark's own creative literary activity and its influence on Matthew and Luke. Mark narrates a series of Jerusalem controversies that involved Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, priests, and others that escalated to the point that Jesus' opponents plotted his death. But Keith investigates neither the identities of these opponents nor their motives for resisting him.

How did a conflict over authority escalate to the point at which some scribal elites sought and won Jesus' death? Keith acknowledges that factors such as Jesus' healings and exorcisms, along with perceptions of Jesus as Messiah or Son of God, would have also exacerbated tensions. To his credit, Keith understands that conflicts over the authority to teach probably do not explain why scribal elites sought his death. Oddly, he does not mention the possibility that Jesus directly antagonized the Jerusalem authorities, who would have had very different reasons for opposing Jesus than did the Pharisees. I would love to see Keith take on that question in a future project. What did Jesus do to get himself killed?

Aquinas on the Beginning and End of Human Life

By Fabrizio Amerini;
translated by Mark Henninger
Harvard University Press,
288 pp., \$29.95

It is a well-known and somewhat embarrassing fact that Thomas Aquinas does not agree with the current Catholic view that from the moment of conception a human being exists, with all the moral weight that such a designation implies. For Aquinas, there is no human being until later in gestation, with the coming of the rational soul. This is called the delayed hominization view.

Those who are interested in reconciling the Angelic Doctor's position with current Catholic claims argue either that he was misled by the rudimentary state of embryology at the time or that a careful reading of various texts can offer a philosophic rapprochement. Fabrizio Amerini, professor of classics at the University of Parma, has written an extraordinarily important analysis of Aquinas. His account creates precision about Aquinas on beginning-of-life issues that is often lacking in philosophical analysis and certainly in abortion polemics. Although the title promises discussion of the end of life,

Reviewed by Dennis O'Brien, author of The Church and Abortion: A Catholic Dissent (Rowman & Littlefield), who lives in Middlebury, Vermont.

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Aquinas actually said very little on the subject, and Amerini follows suit.

Amerini is steadfast in rejecting attempts to find a philosophical resolution to the conflict. The presumed reconciliations cannot be derived from Aquinas's texts. Can one, then, discount Aquinas's views because of bad embryology? Would he have opted for immediate hominization had he known about DNA and the genetic code? Amerini argues persuasively that the crux of Aquinas's view is fundamentally metaphysical and that defects in the science of embryology were not determinative. Aquinas's metaphysics is Aristotelian and thus can still have a profound impact on the moral assessment of abortion.

The word *metaphysics* suggests some kind of airy abstraction. The aim of metaphysics can, however, be regarded as answering the question: What is the ultimate subject of science? The problem with understanding Aquinas is the radical change since his

day in how we answer that question. For Aquinas and his philosophical model, Aristotle, the ultimate subject of science is natures (plural) and how they are defined. Modern science, on the other hand, aims at a unified science of nature (singular). Aquinas, following Aristotle, rejects any unified science in favor of differing sorts of inquiry according to the nature of different things. He would agree with a present-day philosopher of science, Nancy Cartwright, that we live in a "dappled world."

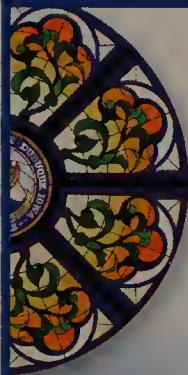
Why opt for such a world? Because a unified science of nature tends to distort what Aristotle regarded as a most obvious physical reality: change. In *On Generation and Corruption* he wrote: "For those who say that the universe is one something (i.e., those who generate all things out of one thing) are bound to assert that coming-to-be is alteration." There are two ways to have a unified science: reduce everyday phenomena to ultimate parts (ancient and

modern atomism), or insist that everyday phenomena can be understood only as functions of an ultimate whole (Plato's "the Good"; Spinoza's "God or Nature"). What we perceive as change does not touch ultimate reality; atoms and God remain unchanging. Change is merely alteration, rearrangement of unchanging atoms or variations in modes of eternal God or nature.

Aquinas's allegiance to Aristotle's dappled world of nonreducible substances could well seem contrary to faith—and did so to many at the time. You can understand why Christian thinkers have been so attracted to some version of the Platonic idea.


What does all this metaphysics have to do with abortion? In a world of many different natures there are also different sorts of change (Socrates grows older; I paint the chair red). What sort of change occurs in biological generation? For Aristotle and Aquinas, generation is a unique change not to be confused with some other sort of change. The typical case of change is when the substance remains the same while change happens to it. Socrates is the same but happens to grow older; the chair is the same but is now painted red. Aquinas rejects the view that in generation there is a fixed substance that remains the same from embryo to birth: generation cannot start with a completed substance; it proceeds toward a completed substance.

The human being, then, is not a variation on the embryo-substance in the way in which Socrates is the same even as he grows older. In the case of humans it is only when the rational soul comes into being that one is a human being. *Soul* is not an essentially theological term. Vegetables and animals have souls, their actual living function. As Aristotle said, "If the eye were the whole body, then seeing would be its soul"—that is, it would be what it does. For humans, the human soul is the special human body with its developed organs of vegetable digestion, animal motion, and capacity for reason. The soul of human beings exists when all the organs become capable of doing their thing. Until this level of development is reached, there is no



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proper human person with full moral weight.

Aquinas's problem is establishing an identity between the embryonic state and the fully realized state toward which the process tends. The direct solution would be to say that the soul is somehow fully present from the beginning. That position was known to him in such writers as Gregory of Nyssa and his near contemporary, Robert Grosseteste. The problem with immediate hominization is that it reduces generation to mere growth: the embryo is a substance that remains the same, that will be altered, not developed. For Aquinas the continuity of generation is sufficient to establish an identity without having to posit that the full human soul, or substance, is present from implantation.

To illustrate what concerned Aristotle and Aquinas, consider how things went wildly wrong in embryology and metaphysics for the 18th-century spermatists. These thinkers held that the male sperm was a homunculus, a small man. Given that view of the sperm, the function of the female egg was to feed the little being until it was big enough to be born. The spermatists thus asserted that from the beginning a human being existed. (But what was the fate of all the spermatist homunculi that were ejected and did not get implanted?) The problem with such a view—and with the current church claim about immediate personhood—is that it seems impossible to distinguish generation from growth. Aristotle, Aquinas, and lots of common sense distinguish between generation, the process in which an embryo becomes a baby, and growth, when the baby becomes bigger, stronger, and older.

I suspect that the current Catholic position is closer to a Platonic metaphysics than to Aquinas's Aristotelian realism. There are no substances in Plato's metaphysics. Things are distinguished by their participation in ideas—we would say that they happen to have such and such properties. From an Aristotelian point of view, all such attribution is accidental. There is an *X* that has certain properties—for example, this particular DNA structure. Is that

enough to say that it is a human being, or would we want additional properties? Thus the difficult issue of deciding when *X* has enough properties to fully earn the label *human*. *X* at various stages could be said to be more or less human. Aristotelian substance—that is, human being—cannot be more or less human. Socrates is not more human (substance) than Alcibiades; the born child is not simply more a human being than the embryo.

Whatever one may think of Aquinas's metaphysics and the special character of generation, his opting for delayed hominization gave him justification for church practices and beliefs. Although it is claimed that the embryo is in some sense a full human being, we do not hold that miscarried fetuses share in the general resurrection or, as Aquinas notes, have a personal guardian angel. Acceptance of delayed hominization would also conform to common law and to the one passage in the Bible about abortion, Exodus 21:22–25, which treats it as less than homicide.

If we were to accept Aquinas's view of the process of generation, how would it change the abortion debate? Abortion would still be viewed as a morally grave act because of continuity toward a body capable of having a rational soul. On the other hand, if in the early stages we are dealing with something that is not yet a perfected human being, I think Amerini is correct; we would “look in a less dramatic way upon the fate of the embryo . . . and approach bioethically certain critical cases with greater adaptability to difficult circumstances.” I agree and would fault much of the official antiabortion rhetoric for overdramatization, which creates a level of moral rhetoric that resists reason and discussion.

Amerini's book, with its long Latin quotations from Aquinas in footnotes to substantiate his analysis, is not for the casual reader. If the proper characterization of generation is ultimately metaphysical, a decision between nature and natures, someone unused to the complexity and profound consequences of metaphysical differences will find the book a challenge. It is, however, worth the effort.



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Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House

By Peter Baker

Doubleday, 832 pp., \$17.95 paperback

Presidential history is a venerable and popular art. Vice presidential history, not so much. One of Franklin Roosevelt's vice presidents, John Nance Garner, famously complained that the office is "not worth a bucket of warm piss," and few historians—or vice presidents—have contested the metaphor.

It is therefore symptomatic of the exceptional character of the vice presidency of Dick Cheney that little surprise is occasioned by Peter Baker's treatment of Cheney as a costar with President George W. Bush in this entertaining if superficial first draft of the history of Bush's years in the Oval Office. Few Americans today could identify any of FDR's vice presidents. And when was the last time you heard the current administration referred to as the Obama-Biden White House? Yet most of us regard the phrase "Bush-Cheney regime" as apt. Even those, such as me, who hold Cheney in very low esteem would not deny his powerful influence on the politics and public policy of the early years of the new century.

The Cheney vice presidency raises a number of crucial questions: Just how powerful was he? How did he secure his power? How did he exercise it? Why did he use it for the ends he did? Baker addresses these questions by way of a highly detailed, sometimes day-by-day narrative in which he attempts to create "a neutral history" of the Bush years. But by pursuing a strictly narrative approach, Baker fails to provide much of an answer to these questions, which require analysis and not simply a story. And by eschewing judgment on the persuasiveness of competing claims about what happened and why, thereby confusing neutrality with objectivity, Baker leaves his readers with the impression that answers to these questions are more elusive than they are.

Unfortunately for Baker, he has a hard act to follow: Barton Gellman's *Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency* (2008). Gellman is keenly analytical and

unafraid to sort through the evidence and make persuasive arguments about where the truth probably lies. Baker mentions Gellman's book once in passing in his text and cites it a few times in his notes, but he never directly engages Gellman's arguments or evidence about issues such as Cheney's selection as Bush's running mate, his control of the presidential transition in late 2000, his actions on 9/11, his influence on economic and environmental policy, and his pre-eminent responsibility for administration policy on terrorist surveillance, imprisonment, and interrogation.

Cheney and other government policy makers often use a metaphor for the kind of reporting and analysis Gellman has done: "deep diving." Gellman analyzes the differences between interviewees' claims and the documentary evidence, usually coming down on the side of the documents. Baker, by comparison, swims along the surface: he simply points out the differences and, in effect, declares a tie, leaving important questions undecided and by implication undecidable.

Baker sets out to dispel the claim that Bush was merely—as in a James McMurtry song—Cheney's toy. "Bush," he says, "was hardly the pawn nor Cheney the puppeteer that critics imagined." But Baker's mixed metaphor is inapt. It fails—as does his argument for Bush's autonomy—to appreciate the genius of Dick Cheney. Pawns and puppets are not human beings; they have neither reason nor will of their own, and hence are much easier to manipulate. Cheney did not, for the most part, make decisions that Bush should have made (though occasionally, and in some very important instances, he did). Bush, as the president himself insisted, was the ultimate decider. What Cheney did do, brilliantly, was determine to an extraordinary degree the context of advice, information, and argument within which Bush made his decisions. Bush may not have been Cheney's toy, but Cheney toyed with him with remarkable skill.

Cheney took full advantage of his standing as the one White House adviser who could not be fired, and he played on his rare position as a vice president without his own presidential ambitions. He

injected himself into policy-making councils and committees where no vice president had ever ventured and created a few new committees for himself. He imbricated his office within the structure of presidential decision making in unprecedented ways. For example, Cheney's top aide, Lewis "Scooter" Libby, was not only his own chief of staff but also an assistant to the president, with standing and access equal to that of Bush's top advisers. Cheney used his control of the presidential transition to plant his allies in the State, Defense, and Treasury departments. He used proxies throughout the government bureaucracy to pursue his aims without leaving telltale fingerprints. He also controlled the flow of information and kept potential adversaries under careful surveillance. For example, e-mails from staff on Condoleezza Rice's National Security Council were blind-copied to Cheney's office without the correspondents' knowledge.

Cheney sized up his president with typical acuity. Bush was not dumb, but he was incurious, uninterested in detail, impatient with extended debate, and delighted to have others do his homework for him. Cheney exploited these traits, which were the opposite of his own. He was himself intensely curious, and he was well informed—even learned—about the arcana of economics and constitutional law. Away from his desk, he lugged around a huge briefcase filled with thick briefing books, which he read carefully, right down to the appendices and footnotes. He was a talented listener, patient in hearing out interlocutors before advancing penetrating questions that got to the heart of the matter. He played his cards close to the vest, saying little or nothing in collective meetings with the president, then remained afterward to offer his counsel privately when there was no one to contest him. Alternatively he waited for his weekly breakfast with the president to advance his projects.

To what ends did Cheney deploy his remarkable abilities as a bureaucratic infighter? What best explains why he sought the power he accumulated and the policies he pursued with it? Here again, Baker is not much of a guide. He leaves it largely up to his readers to figure things out for themselves.

Cheney had two lodestars for much of what he did in the Bush White House. First, he was fanatically devoted to a radical view of presidential power that some observers went so far as to call monarchical. Second, when confronted with the possibility of disasters of low probability but high consequence, he had a propensity to err on the side of exceptional caution and to do whatever was necessary, niceties of law and ethics aside, to reduce their probability to as close to zero as he could. The war on terror was ready-made for the conjunction of these two qualities: it afforded plenty of unlikely but awful consequences that called for the president to exercise exceptional constitutional latitude. All of the appalling landmarks of the first Bush administration were a consequence of this conjunction: the imprisonment of suspected terrorists without trial at Guantánamo, the use of torture, warrantless domestic surveillance by the National Security Agency, and, not least, the war in Iraq.

By Bush's second term, blowback from Cheney's strenuous efforts had begun to wear away his power. Some of those over whom Cheney had ridden roughshod in the first term, as well as some newcomers, were emboldened to push back. Of particular importance, Baker implies, was Rice, the one adviser who could compete with Cheney for the ear of the man whom she inadvertently referred to as "my husband." Cheney remained a force to be reckoned with, but Rice and others helped Bush leave office with a national security policy that evolved from appalling to just plain awful. As Baker writes, the principal accomplishment of Bush's second term was mitigating the damage of his first term.

Baker says little about Bush's domestic policies, from the tax cut that wiped out the Clinton budget surplus to the education reforms that ensured that the tail of testing would wag the dog of learning in American schools. Baker does discuss the financial meltdown of the closing months of the Bush regime, but he says nothing about the role that the administration played in fostering it. This is per-

haps as it should be in a book in which Cheney has equal billing. Though the vice president did have some impact on domestic policy, what Cheney cared about most deeply, as he often said frankly, was protecting his country from dire threats from abroad, however improbable, and securing for the executive exceptional power to address such awful scenarios while insulated from the constraints of Congress, the courts, and public opinion.

Although Bush and Cheney were unpopular by the time they left office, they were both confident that they had acted in the national interest and were, they both said, willing to leave their reputations to history. Unfortunately, new regulations that Cheney forged will make it difficult for historians to get their hands on the documents they need to make that assessment anytime soon.



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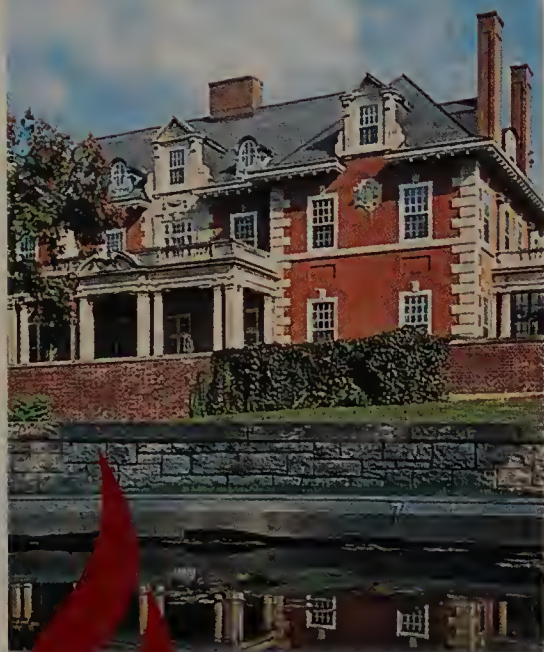


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Healthy Churches, Faithful Pastors: Covenant Expectations for Thriving Together

By David Keck

Rowman & Littlefield, 206 pp.,
\$20.00 paperback

What's the hardest thing about being a pastor?" Church members and lay friends ask me this question from time to time, curious about a job that's not really a job but a way of life. After 15 years of congregational ministry I answer without hesitation: the hardest part of being a pastor is contending with the multiple, contradictory, and competing expectations of the congregation. Classic among these, of course, is: "We want the church to grow, Pastor, but don't change a thing because we like it the way it is."

Eugene H. Peterson has encouraged pastors to turn their attention from congregational expectations to vocational holiness. In much of his writing in the 1980s and '90s he called pastors to resist the temptation of providing religious goods and services to spiritual consumers and challenged them to avoid the lure of careerism. He urged them to tend instead to expectations peculiar to pastoral ministry and necessary for the spiritual vitality of the church. My personal favorite of these books is *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration of Vocational Holiness*, which grew out of a 1989 seminar. I return repeatedly to recordings of that seminar for guidance.

In a conversation with a group of pastors and seminary professors several years ago, I had heard Peterson say he

had given up writing to pastors about vocational holiness. They weren't getting it, he said. But the problem with addressing issues of vocational holiness only to pastors is that pastors are accountable to congregations and judicatory leaders who have their own expectations, which may or may not line up with the vocational holiness necessary for vital pastoral ministry. Addressing vocational expectations requires tending to the ecosystems in which pastors live and work.

David Keck's *Healthy Churches, Faithful Pastors* is a refreshing addition to the conversation about expectations. Peterson's vision of vocational holiness resonates with Keck, but Keck takes a different tack. This conversation starter and discussion guide assumes a framework of covenant rather than contract.

The book emerged from a research project funded by the Louisville Institute, which yielded ten organizing principles for a "vibrant church community." Drawing on his research, Keck also created three composite lay leaders and three composite clergy who act as guides throughout the book. Most of the book is organized by chapters, each addressing an aspect of ministry or congregational life. In the three-chapter section on "what healthy congregations can expect from faithful pastors," he discusses theology and worship, self-knowledge and self-care, and healthy servant leadership. In the section on "what faithful pastors can expect from healthy congregations," he focuses on mission and ministry, administration and structure, supporting the pastor, and supporting the pastor's family.

Reviewed by Phil Waite, pastoral team leader at
College Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana.



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Keck is a Presbyterian pastor with a Ph.D. in history, but his writing here is accessible rather than academic. Published by Rowman & Littlefield as an Alban Institute book, the volume is in keeping with Alban's tradition of offering practical help to congregations.

Though Keck's book is accessible, it is also challenging. I expect that most pastors will at least quibble with some of the expectations, and Keck prescribes some tough-to-swallow medicine for congregations here too. He makes some assumptions about the nature of ministry that will meet with resistance as well. Keck understands pastors to be leaders who equip the saints for ministry, the work of the church. Many congregations expect that pastors will do the work of the church on behalf of its members, and many pastors have been trained to meet that expectation. It's the cozy circle Peterson had in mind when he challenged pastors to stop being providers of religious goods and services to spiritual consumers.

Keck challenges pastors and lay lead-

ers to take up this conversation. He warns that unless pastors and lay leaders can agree that the purpose of the church is serving God and not its members, and that the pastor's primary job is leading in that service, any work on expectations is in vain. Expectations need to be developed in the context of mutual ministry—that is, the whole ministry of the church.

I have one significant frustration with *Healthy Churches, Faithful Pastors*. I'm not sure whom it is intended for, and I'm not sure how to get the conversation started. The book is a discussion guide, but who should be part of the discussion? The church board? A pastor-congregation relations committee? Sunday school classes? Small groups? How should the conversation happen? Who should lead it? Are there models of churches that have done this work and been successful? I came away wanting more direction.

Keck's work is a valuable contribution to conversations regarding pastor-congregation relations. If only we can discern where those conversations should occur.



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Dr. Robert M. Franklin, Jr.
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Cosmic questions

Perhaps science fiction movies are always theological movies in disguise. The question “Are we alone in the universe?” sounds big, ponderous, and existential. But if we discover life on other planets, as a friend of mine opines, “We’ll just be alone with the Martians.” “Are we alone in the universe?” is always a question about God’s existence.

Interstellar shows this clearly. It’s a big, ponderous, self-important movie by Christopher Nolan, creator of the latest Batman films. While it falls short of its outsized ambitions, the movie still satisfies. And it does so by raising the question of a very modern god: technology. Modernity is marked by a trust that technology will allow us to master our universe and outlive mortal challenges. This film nearly jettisons this cheerful faith.

In the not too distant future, environmental ruin has made Earth nearly uninhabitable. The whole planet is one big dust bowl. Most crops won’t grow and the few that do are primed for blight. But NASA, or what is left of it, is on the case, secretly building a spacecraft to either transport human life off the planet or transplant fertilized eggs to some more livable locale. Here is modernist faith throwing one last Hail Mary pass. Did I mention that NASA calls this the Lazarus Project?

The movie focuses on the relationship between Cooper (Matthew McConaughey) and his daughter Murphy (Mackenzie Foy and Jessica Chastain). As a child, Murphy idolizes her father for his farming and flying skills and learns all the science she can from this former astronaut. When he heads out on a space venture that may save the planet, his ship is unable to broadcast messages home for decades (relativity means hours for him but years for her). Yet Murphy continues to send messages into

empty space in hopes that he’s still listening. The movie touches on the deepest fear of every child and every parent: abandonment and failure, respectively. Cooper is off to save the human race, but Murphy is hurt and angry at being abandoned.

Despite its modernist leanings, the movie has a touch of the supernatural in it. In ten-year-old Murphy’s bedroom, books fall without explanation. The dust swirling into her room arranges itself into patterns. Father and daughter realize that these patterns reveal coordinates. They discover NASA’s secret building site, and NASA discovers Cooper as a candidate to fly its mission. It’s a little too metaphysically tidy.

The film is filled with stock memes, most notably the rural Iowa-like hometown of Cooper and family. Most astronauts probably live in places like suburban Huntsville, Cape Canaveral, or Houston, but we Americans seem to want our saviors to be surrounded by ears of corn and white frame houses that need a paint job. Somehow McConaughey’s Texas accent and Iowa’s endless fields are made to go together. But just because you say things wistfully, looking off into the distance, doesn’t make them

deep—see Jim Carrey’s parody of McConaughey on *Saturday Night Live*.

Often the film manages to break past stereotypes. Its imagery of a tiny little speck of a lifeboat ship against the grandeur of Saturn and its rings will stay with me forever. Computer-generated imagery of a black hole is both beautiful and frightening. At one point on the voyage, the astronauts bump into Dr. Mann (Matt Damon), another astronaut, but one who has opted to fight for his own survival rather than that of his fellow humans: “Don’t judge me,” he says. “You haven’t been through what I have.” His life-and-death wrestling match with Cooper recalls Cain and Abel. In the end these scientists are making decisions that affect our whole species on the basis of nothing stronger than human love and hate.

By the end of the movie the humans realize that they’re not alone with Martians or other saviors; they’re alone with themselves. But the same god they’ve trusted in the past becomes available to them again. We viewers are to leave the theater hopeful: sure, they might have ruined this planet. But they’ll hustle up a fix for this problem at some point, with some amazing new gizmo. Take heart, ye of little faith.



ASTRONAUT DAD: In *Interstellar*, ten-year-old Murphy (Mackenzie Foy) is hurt and angry when her father (Matthew McConaughey) leaves on a space venture.

The author is Jason Byassee, senior pastor at Boone United Methodist Church in Boone, North Carolina.

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CHURCH in the MAKING

by Carol Howard Merritt

As I settled into the pew at All Souls Episcopal Church in Berkeley, California, my eyes turned to the crayons strategically placed in the seats as an invitation for the adults to color their bulletin along with the children. I had a strange kid-at-a-birthday-party feeling. I studied the order of worship and realized that the service would mix the expected and the whimsical.

We sang the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty” during the procession. During the Gospel acclamation, however, the choir picked up stringed instruments and led us in a spiritual to which we clapped—which created a different sort of resonance and reverence for the Gospel reading. Throughout the hour, banjos and the organ frolicked together in a way that comforted and surprised me.

As new forms of congregations arise, new musical forms are developing. The walls that separate the secular and sacred, the intellect and emotions, and the contemporary and traditional are being deconstructed.

Tripp Hudgins, an American Baptist pastor and a musician at All Souls Episcopal, explained that All Souls previously had a choir that was getting older and dwindling in numbers. It consisted of a dozen faithful people who couldn’t quite do

what they hoped to do. At the same time, the congregation had an “Angel Band” which occasionally played in worship. The band began playing every week, going back to old-time music and drawing upon the folk revival that in Berkeley never ended. Then the band members stepped into the loft to learn the choir music. As they did, they were able to carefully tear down the sacred and secular divide.

Hudgins admits that the process wasn’t always easy. “We all have a spiritual soundtrack. There is music of spiritual significance that can bring us into worship,” he noted. “People from the choir era struggle when choral music is not there. That’s their music. That’s what they pray to. For them, the banjo is secular.”

But another generation has a different soundtrack. Its sacred music might consist of mountain music and songs by Mumford & Sons. Hudgins lights up with excitement as he talks about surprising people in worship with music that sits at the intersection of sacred and secular.

Bryan Sirchio, a UCC pastor, musician, and author, sees music as being at the heart of congregational change. He wants to develop more meaningful praise music—a theologically sound “heart music.”

“In the kinds of churches

that have grown in vitality, music has been a big key,” Sirchio said. If we ignore music, then we “throw away the opportunity to do spiritual formation, build community, and sing our faith.”

At some services, he said, it’s often clear that a hymn has been chosen on the basis of its theological content rather than on the capacity of the congregation to sing it—and the congregation gives up before the final chorus. In another service, the words of the praise music songs might undercut the liberal theology expressed in the rest of the service. Sirchio tries to tackle the dissonance in a positive way: “What do we want our music to do? What are we longing to find?”

Sirchio, author of *The Six Marks of Progressive Christian Worship Music*, wants music that reflects the fullness of human experience, including the struggle for justice; inclusive language for humanity and God; songs that reflect the personal and the communal, while containing emotional authenticity; fresh images, language, and ideas. Sirchio is forming a publishing company that will be a catalog of songs that speak “the heart language of the people,” with emotional

resonance and intellectual depth.

Neither Hudgins nor Sirchio is trashing the hymnbooks. Instead, they are seeking to engage with hymns in a different manner. David Gambrell, a hymnodist who contributed to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) hymnal *Glory to God*, thinks that hymnal has been appreciated because it’s a “big tent book.” Within it one can find “classic hymns rubbing elbows with global refrains, gospel favorites, praise choruses, old spirituals, and new types of song that defy categorization.”

Gambrell highlighted many of the musical expressions that I experienced at All Souls. For instance, he pointed out how people can sing classic hymns with different instrumentation.

“The pastors, musicians, and congregations I talk to seem to be finally moving beyond the labels of ‘contemporary’ and ‘traditional.’ Instead, people seem more interested in finding the right song for the scripture and service, regardless of style.”

Communities of faith are deconstructing the musical silos in which we too often find ourselves trapped. A new, eclectic, vibrant spiritual soundtrack of faith is being created.

Carol Howard Merritt’s column *Church in the Making* appears in every other issue.

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Adoration of the Magi, by Gentile da Fabriano (ca. 1423)

The adoration of the Magi was an important subject for Florentines, as many men were part of the civic organization dedicated to the Magi. Palla Strozzi, a powerful banker, commissioned Gentile da Fabriano (1385–1427) to paint this work for his family burial chapel in the sacristy of Santa Trinita in Florence. Da Fabriano's paintings combine the naturalism of the Early Renaissance with the elegant, refined drapery style and meticulous attention to detail that characterize the International Gothic style. In this composition, the oldest Magus prostrates himself before the Christ child, who affectionately touches his balding head; the second Magus lifts his right hand to remove his crown; the youngest Magus stands waiting his turn. The predella (the horizontal panel beneath the central composition) shows three scenes from the infancy narrative of Christ: *Nativity* (bottom left) is believed to be the first painted night scene.

Art selection and commentary by Mikeal C. Parsons, who teaches in the religion department at Baylor University, and Heidi J. Hornik, who teaches in the school's art department.

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